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HEMLOCK GROVE

Tales, Reflections, and Nightmares

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PART ONE: TALES

PRAY FOR ME

A Ghost-story

The heavy hand of Providence has directed me, through the long years, to the sides of more deathbeds than I care to make account of, and I have become—regrettable though it is to say—something of an expert in the way men die. Most often it is a placid and predictably somber affair; with those perishing from old age or from fever, having received the final benediction (the delivery of which is invariably the purpose of my being at the scene), appearing to be exceedingly tranquil—even relieved—at the strange and sudden lowering of death’s veil upon their straining features. Some others—especially men dying of wounds—appear, until the end, to persist in a sort brave, salutary struggle—their teeth gritted and their fists clenched at their sides, they meet the moment with their eyes open and an idle curse glancing from their lips. My friend and protégé, the young Reverend Jeremiah Quill, a faithful servant of the Lord, presented what is to this day the only really extraordinary exception to this tedious strain of gloomy observations: for never have I seen a man more unutterably terrified of dying than he.

I’ll relate to you the whole horrid circumstance. I was called to the parsonage of Reverend Quill two hours before dawn, and by the time I had arrived at his side, his

tall, cross-thatched windows were looking out upon a world that was composed of the black silhouettes of the churchyard—its sprawling crop of crosses and obelisks—pressed against the mute, weirdly lachrymose blue of the morning's earliest nativity. His horrible groaning and raving could be heard even before the ponderous oak door was opened, and the first image my eyes met upon starting into his garishly illuminated chamber, was his frail, wasted hand thrusting at the air over his bedside, as if intended to repel some over-solicitous intruder. Of course I knew it was not me he was waving away, as the hand he used was on the side of the window, but when he heard my footstep at the threshold, and my voice gasping out his name, he fixed his eyes on me with a brief look of incomprehensible panic, and greeted me with a shriek of maniac alarm. Then it was as if scales had dropped from his vision, and he heaved an agonized sigh, holding his arms out to me and sobbing my name as piteously as if I were the one from whom life was fleeing. I took both his hands, and with tears jumping to my eyes, saw the monstrous wound that the hatchet had torn in his bone-white, emaciated belly. It was a ghastly sight—the once-white bandage wrapped tightly around his leaping ribs, now soaked nearly black with a relentless brook of blood; the skeletal meagerness of his formerly slender but healthy frame; the livid, uncontainable horror that raged in his darting, dilated eyes. I suppose I must admit that, despite my boundless love for poor Quill, the spectacle he presented in his last moments nearly

repulsed me—nearly drove me from the room. Conquering myself, however, I took a chair by the edge of the bed, and, stroking his thin golden hair with my fingers, bid him to tell me what had happened.

“It’s too late, Cowley,” he cried, “far, far too late—and now, *nobody’s listening!*”

Very perplexed by this unaccountable declaration, I said, “Quill, Quill, my boy, *I’m here, I’m listening!* What is it that you must say?”

Poor man! He was growing whiter and more frantic by the second—every few moments, turning his eyes upon some other corner of the room and bawling with some fresh renewal of anguish and dismay. I supposed that the shock of the accident had left him quite without his wits, and I grieved that his last hour would be passed so pathetically.

“You don’t understand,” Quill wailed, “you don’t see, can’t hear—nobody can—there’s nothing to do! Ah, God! There’s nowhere to go! Nothing, no one, nowhere!”

He was all but unintelligible; his tongue fell back in his throat and he was seized by an excruciating fit of coughing, during which I could see fresh beads of blood bubbling up along the bandage’s inundated surface. When this had passed, he lay quite still, his head against my arm, his eyes dimming but still agitated with peering to and fro.

“When I’m gone, Cowley,” he whispered jaggedly, “When I’m gone over, you must—Cowley—you must pray for me, pray for me!”

“Nay, lad,” I said with assurance, “You’ll already be with the saints, marching on to Glory. You’ll need no prayers from me. The way you’re passing, there Heaven lies—the angels of God are ranged even now upon its parapets, waiting to herald His servant’s victorious coming. In the living presence of the Savior, you’ll need no prayers from me.”

I’ll never know what I’d said that perturbed him so, but at this moment—his last moment—he began to cry out in hopeless horror, as if some devouring force were upon him. He let go of my hands and began to beat the air again with a look of helplessness that tore my heart. His frail body, meantime—wasted by months of mysterious sickness and fasting—was shaken by spasms and paroxysms, seeming quite ready to shatter him into fragments. His afflictions seemed to have nothing to do with the mortal injury that was his true cause of death: they appeared to be brought on by a latent madness—a hysterical fear of perishing that, I confess, was wholly unbecoming a man of his goodness and faith. At last, with his penultimate expiration, he gave a departing howl of “*PRAY FOR ME!*” and, sinking back against my arm, spoke no more—his soul flitting invisibly from some unknowable aperture, to take its noble rank among the denizens of Paradise.

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Reverend Quill had been a man of preternatural—almost ascetic—earnestness and material simplicity. He endured the picturesque brick parsonage, with its single tower embraced fawningly by arms of ivy, and its little garden with its marble bath and benches, only because of his anxiousness not to appear ungrateful; otherwise, he might have been more at ease in a lowly, mud-walled cabin, or back in the stifling garret that he had occupied as a young scholar. He had kept the place nearly bare of furnishings—retaining those few antique articles that had belonged to it before his establishment at the parish, but introducing nothing of his own, as he had nothing—nor wanted anything—to introduce. Amongst his congregants it was lamented that he had never evinced an inclination to take another wife—a congenial helpmeet to banish his brooding nature and revive his solemn chambers with the pleasant breath of domesticity. Though Quill had been a widower for years, he adhered to his young wife’s memory as if it were a tangible being, and took his solace from the knowledge that she awaited him in heaven. Without permitting himself to encroach upon idolatry, Quill nevertheless reserved an inviolable place for his departed bride in all of his most intimate devotions—almost coming to see her as a privileged ancillary to the institution of the Trinity, assisting him toward ever-deeper asseverations of faith, and maintaining him in his aloofness to all but the most essential of earthly affinities. The thorn of her passing was in great measure the secret to Quill’s ecclesiastical efficacy: he bore with him an abiding and

transcendent sorrow, through which he could view all of mankind with an empathy and forbearance that was, in my opinion, uncommonly Christ-like. I have the girl's miniature before me as I write, and can see in her a gentleness of spirit and nobility of character that would inspire the highest traits in any man, especially one of Quill's excellence.

While Quill had undoubtedly laid up an emperor's worth of treasure in heaven, his earthly treasure belonged chiefly to the almshouse. His whole remaining fortune, therefore, consists of a modest but carefully-chosen library, and a prodigious accumulation of his own sermons, meditations, translations, commentaries, &c., over which he must have labored assiduously, without ever concerning himself with the prospect of publication. Since I am as near to being a relative of his as any other person living, these papers have come happily into my own possession, and I am presently—with profoundest humility and contentedness—preparing to spend my declining years devoted to their study and dissemination, as a service to his dear, sad memory, and his sadly neglected name.

There is one paper, however, that must be given immediate regard, for the relation that it contains of the frankly mystifying circumstances of Quill's life during the year that preceded his demise, over the course of which he had been noticed to cherish his solitude more and more. Indeed, I myself had spoken and corresponded with him very little through the months that are described, and had,

upon once paying him a visit, expressed to him my concern over his growing nervousness and melancholy—to which he then declined the attribution of a cause. The narrative was discovered on his desk, in an envelope inscribed with my name. I give it to you now, complete and unaltered, in the hopeful confidence that you can tell me what I ought to make of it.

REVEREND QUILL'S NARRATIVE

You will forgive me, dear Cowley, for the haste and the confusion in which I may appear to write, and also for the unsteadiness of my hand, which now trembles day and night with unbroken constancy. Not my hand only, but the whole of me is atremble much of the time now, and I am always cold—cold inside and out. I have come to a point beyond mere desperation; I have come to a point where I do not know what to do, or whom to apply to for aid, for rest. I wish to say—I wish to say that not even *God*—but no, I must not! However it appears, it must never come to that. The world must not be closed.

You don't know my meaning. How could you? I will try—am trying—to explain myself—to find my own hand and my own mind, so that I can tell you what needs to be told—and what *must not* be told... for what then would there be? What would there be for us, or for anyone? But I'll explain. I'll explain.

I'll begin seven months ago: a frightfully cold and gusty November evening, on which I was engaged, as

always, in my study, staring into my small fire and ruminating over potential subjects for my next sermon. I had been thinking, at the time, of the joys to come—the nature of Heaven, the perfection of the resurrected body, the seraphim and cherubim that ring the throne of God—and, of course, of Dianne, who so anxiously and deservedly preceded me to that glorious sphere. How could I describe such a place for the benefit of my congregants, whose rustic imaginations might trivialize or misapprehend what may be only symbols—crude metaphorical devices for things lying beyond the reach of mortal senses? As I sat pondering, a feverish banging began upon the front door; I answered it and was told that the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Albertson was in a grave condition, and that the doctor had pronounced her lost. I put on my hat and coat, took up my Book, and followed the messenger away into the night.

You know such scenes too well for me to exhaust myself in describing this one. The child lay still beneath her gay-colored quilt, the roses of her cheeks drooping and faded, her eyes rolling loosely behind half-closed lids, thin mouth open as if in recalling a forgotten enquiry.... Her gaunt mother, suddenly aged, knelt with wrung hands at the tidy bedside, pouring her silent exhortations into the girl's wilting features; her father sallow and detached, his fingers boring pits into the back of the vacant chair with which he held himself vaguely erect. I knew at once it was true: Death might have nodded a greeting as I passed into the little family's noiseless, breathless midst. The girl's

eyes drifted over to me when I approached, but her expression—the questioning, the cruelly knowing—didn't change. She had, I think, been waiting for me. As I began my prayers, her eyes flickered open very briefly, then closed with relief, with decision—and away she went.

The girl was buried on the eastern side of the cemetery, and a small white stone was planted at the head of the grave, the outline of which was told by a bump of broken earth, like the bump of her body beneath the overdrawn quilt. Mrs. Albertson stared direfully at me for much of the funeral service—transferring her fearsome, agonized gaze to the casket only when it was being lowered—lightly, carefully—into the ground. Even as I performed my too-familiar office, I found myself anxiously wondering what was meant by that stare, surmising with sorrow that she regarded me as a representative of the malignant and impersonal cosmic institution that had purposelessly appointed her daughter for death; that she held me to blame. But I remembered how impotently my prayers had seemed to sound against the stony walls of Heaven when Dianne lay dying—how had I raged at God's obstinacy—how I had cast my Book of Prayer into the fire, then dived into the embers to salvage it, and knelt weeping as it smoldered against my breast.... A young bride, torn from her marriage bed; a tiny child, dragged from her parent's arms... Was there not time enough in Heaven to wait for so unripe an harvest?

The window of my study faces east across the graveyard, and as the weeks went on and the snows began

to fall, I would note the lean black figure of Mrs. Albertson making her way through blizzard and drift, every day without cessation, to clear the face of her daughter's diminutive tombstone. Often she would hover there for more than an hour, though the weather grew colder and stormier by the day, and I would be distracted with worry until I saw her wending her way gradually back again, her ashen face downcast against the wind. One bleak day in the middle of December, as I was at work preparing my Christmas sermons, I marked her again embarking on the path to her melancholy vigil. I frowned, taking account of the sky and seeing that its leaden grayness was giving way to ill-portending black, while the treetops rocked fretfully as they do in anticipation of a gale. Nearly an hour passed, and, as I had feared, a thick snow began to cut across the panes of my window, urged violently by a garrulous wind. My agitation over Mrs. Albertson's long failure to reappear made it impossible for me to resume my work, and as I paced to and fro before my fireplace, my imagination began to seethe with terrible visions of the frail mourner being overcome by the icy inundation. At last I threw on my coat and scarf and passed out into the raging world, to trace the woman's rapidly vanishing footprints as they weaved through the monuments, toward her daughter's grave. I had never gone willingly into fiercer weather: the cold pierced me like a thousand arrows, the snow clung to my garments with the stubborn ferocity of an attack-dog, endeavoring to wrestle me down into the spinning waves of white. I called for Mrs. Albertson as I stumbled on, but

the wet wind seemed to snatch my voice away as it left my lips. I stopped once or twice, imagining that I had apprehended a tiny and feeble response, but concluding that it had been a trick of the tempest, mocking me as it chased through the graves.

I finally found the poor woman not at the little, snow-obscured headstone of her daughter, but just beyond it, on the easternmost outskirts of the cemetery, confusedly struggling toward the wood—hoping, perhaps, for shelter beneath the moaning branches. I cried her name again, but she took no notice of me until I grasped her by the arm, at which point she turned and regarded me with a look full of bewilderment and agitation—though she presented no resistance as I turned her in the direction of the rectory. She seemed scarcely able to hold herself up, her light body falling against mine with every other step, her uncovered head—shorn of hat and veil by the wind—hanging in weary disorder.

No fire was burning in the parsonage except the one in my study, so it was there that I carried her when we had at last gotten past the threshold and shut the thwarted storm out behind us, laying her—soaked to the marrow and all but insensible—on the couch where I often take my rest. I relieved her of her saturated coat and wrapped her in a fur that lay near-at-hand, placing my frozen palm upon her brow and finding that it was raging with fever. Through the fury of her trembling, her eyes lifted toward me in plaintive desperation, she labored to force a word through her pallid lips. I brought my ear down to her, and,

in the weakest, most broken of whispers, she asked, “Did you not hear her?”

“It was I that was calling for you, Mrs. Albertson,” I said.

“No, not you,” she breathed, “my girl—my little Gretta—lost and frightened, crying from the woods!”

“Mrs. Albertson,” I said, “you’re ill—you mustn’t try to speak. I assure you that little Gretta is safe now—happy and safe in the arms of the Lord.”

“Not happy, not safe,” she protested, shivering horribly, “lost, afraid—alone! My Gretta is all alone!”

With this most awful of utterances, she sobbed one violent, desolate sob, and passed out of consciousness.

The doctor came with Mr. Albertson, who had been discovered seeking his wife on the road to the church, and quickly made a dire assessment of the pitiful woman’s condition. The weeks of continuous exposure to winter’s baneful influences had vitiated her beyond any reasonable hope of recovery; Mr. Albertson insisted ruefully that he had been able to do nothing to prevent his wife from going to the graveyard every day, and that the two of them had exchanged scarcely a word since their daughter had been laid to rest. “And now,” he cried, almost breaking down, with his face pressed to the limp hands of his heart’s companion, “now I will never hear her voice again!”

For three days and nights, Mrs. Albertson lay silently consumed by fever, slipping at last out of suffering’s inescapable reach mere hours after I had delivered

extreme unction over her. Nothing could persuade Mr. Albertson to leave her side; he sat with her until her breast gave its last gentle flutter, and then he sat with her body until the hour it was taken for burial. His destitution was fathomless—his grief almost monstrous: I could descry on his sunken visage the black seal of irretrievable despair.

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Albertson seemed scarcely to acknowledge either me or any other person as the prayers were read at his wife's funeral; instead, he brooded transfixedly upon her coffin—its lonely dusting of mournful snowflakes—wearing a look of pained incredulity. As we stood together before the two humble mounds, beneath which his wife and daughter took their inviolable repose, I endeavored to speak to him of Heaven.

“They have found each other,” I said, “in a world of joy surpassing expression. You must not think of them as lost, but as retrieved—reunited by God's good pleasure, to await you in perfection, and to guide you evermore in the spirit of Holy love. Surrender not to sorrow, young man. Let the Lord call you in His own fair time, and let Him find you faithfully doing your work in the world, with your hands on the plow and your eyes on the Kingdom to come. Time and honest labor will deliver you of this yoke of tears.”

Albertson said nothing. There came to his lean, well-formed countenance, a tightening—a twitch of grim

resignation. Without regarding me, he turned and began to plod his slow, solitary way through the gray maze of snow-topped tombstones.

The next evening, I was sitting in melancholy contemplation before my fire, the parsonage all dark and empty around me, watching undulating arabesques of sweet-smelling tobacco smoke ascend and scatter from the bowl of my pipe. There was a book lying unopened on my knee, on which my finger was absently tapping the rhythm of an old tune that Dianne had delighted in playing for me at Christmastime; in my mind I could hear her voice singing faintly, as from a great distance, that foolish lyric I now wished I could recall. Memory is as tempting a siren as was ever met by Odysseus—its vain and specious allurements promising nothing tangible, only wreckage and dismay among old bones and forsaken bounties. “*The holly bears a bark as bitter as any gall*,” I was mouthing to myself, “*And Mary bore sweet Jesus for to redeem us all...*” Ah! I could hear her! I teetered after that ancient sound, as down a path in perfect darkness, knowing already of the Nothing to which it would lead me, but following, following, helplessly following—to the brightly chiming piano, to the wreath-bedecked parlor, to the bedroom, to the deathbed, to the coffin, to the graveside—ah, Dianne!

I sat up with a shudder, as if a cold breath had fallen on the back of my neck; the silence of the house was suddenly too terrible to bear—the humble fire had shrunk to a few struggling embers—the room so dark

that I could see the tombs all forlornly assembled in the moonlight outside. But I was not alone. The door of my study stood open, and behind me, a voice—

“Pray for me.”

I leaped up with a short cry, my book dropping to the floor, and found myself facing Albertson. He had let himself in—I must have been too immersed in reverie to hear his knocking—or his footsteps.... But God, what a tragic image he presented! He stood there trembling in his shirtsleeves, his hollow, shadow-beset face all tear-streaked and unshaven, his hands clutching the back of my chair the way they’d clutched his own at his daughter’s bedside.

“Heavens, man—you’ve come all this way without a coat?” I ejaculated, my heart still flopping in my chest as if it had come unbound from some vital mooring. “Here, I’ll get this fire going for you—sit down, sit down—tell me what’s on your mind...”

Albertson didn’t move: his eyes, sunk deep into their teary pits, stared pleadingly into mine. *“Pray for me,”* he said again—his lips scarcely opening—his voice little more than a strained, rattling whisper. The smell of whiskey met my nostrils with a withering acridity that reminded me of sickness and bile, typhoid and hay-fever.

“I will, young man, I will,” I stammered—but I didn’t know where to begin. My prayers had all left me, fleeing as if in panic to the unreachable recesses of my brain. I was just putting my hand forward to lay it on his quaking shoulder, when a tremendous battery of knocks began to

sound sharply upon my front door. Ah, my nerves were near to snapping! I gave Albertson a quick, apologetic bow, promised to return in a moment, and went out into the unlit antechamber to confront the interruption.

When I opened the door, there stood the messenger boy in the flickering nimbus of his lantern, his face pale and his breathing labored. “Reverend Quill,” he gasped out, “I’m sorry, but it’s Mr. Albertson, Reverend—he’s, he’s...”

“He’s quite all right,” I broke in, realizing what was amiss. “I’ve got him with me right now, in my study—a little out of sorts, but perfectly all right. You can call off the search.”

The messenger gaped up at me, his lips quivering as if in baffled indecision. “The search, Reverend?” he said. “There is no search. We found him—just an hour ago—*hanging!* That’s what I’m—”

“Hanging, lad?” I cried, “What in God’s name can you mean?”

“He’s dead, sir,” returned the boy. “He’s with the doctor.”

I could stand for no more of this perverse little joke: I took the rascal by his scarf and pulled him inside, saying, “Confound it, I’ll show him to you, and we’ll put an end to your shameless tomfoolery!”

The messenger slid behind me on his snow-slick boot-soles, his lantern still clattering in his hand, casting its frantic beams all over the hallway. I brought him to my

study door, threw it open, and pushed him inside. “See?” I cried.

But he saw nothing, and neither did I. The room was vacant—the fireplace glowing and crackling jubilantly—the air warm and smelling of tobacco.

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Ah, Cowley, Cowley! This was the beginning—only the beginning—and as I write to you now, I can see no end; though I know that it *must* end—somehow it must! If it were no one but Albertson—if it were only that night—I might have been able to dismiss it as a dream—a disordered fantasy brought on by my inveterate indulgence in gloomy reminiscing—too much time spent peering out over the graveyard. I might have resigned it to the murky place of queer, sympathetic coincidence, where consciousness and unconsciousness cross like two frigates on opposite courses, signaling dumbly to each other from across some dreary canal. But since then, I have seen them all—*heard* them all—and others—others upon others—more and more every night! It wasn’t longer than three nights after I had presided over poor Albertson’s burial that, hunched over my papers, determined to work on without fear of the devil’s morbid parlor-tricks, I once again felt that indescribable chill land against the back of my collar. I looked up, and there, next to my own reflection in the blackened windowpane, was the girl—little Gretta Albertson herself—as bone-thin and

sickly as I had seen her last. I tried to turn, but found myself frozen. My tongue heavier than a sack of musket balls, I somehow found the breath to ask, “What do you want?” And do you know what she answered? “*Pray for me! Pray for me!*”

“*Pray for me!*” Is there no other phrase in their whole phantasmagoric vocabulary than this? God, Cowley—why, “*Pray for me?*” The moon was radiant and full the next night. I sat at my desk, surrounded by candles, my fire burning at twice its usual size, staring like an idiot at the reflection in the window, *daring* the girl to appear again—madly thinking that if I could only get my hands around her, I could scare the demon she unmistakably was back into its true shape, then punt it back to perdition with a curse to make its horns curl. I sat and sat until the candles all guttered on their last wick, until the fire wilted into black nothing, until the sun’s scarlet fingertips began to grope among the treetops. My eyes stinging with weariness, I peered out over the tombstones and thought I saw, in the filmy grayness of the nascent dusk, a black figure astir upon the cemetery’s eastern boundary. I watched it intently for minute after minute, but everything about it was so damnably indistinct: I could never conclude whether it was coming or going, growing or shrinking, human or animal, moving or still. Finally, borne to the limits of fatigue, I tore my gaze away from the inexplicable shape and dragged myself toward the couch, intent upon a snatching few hours’ sleep. Preparing to climb underneath, I drew back the rumpled fur, and felt

the breath leave me all at once in what ought to have been a shriek. I had uncovered the face of Mrs. Albertson, lips of cobalt and cheeks of alabaster, eyes wrenched wide and drained of pigment. “*Pray for me!*” she murmured. I cried out in wild horror and cast the blanket back over the thing’s ghastly, cadaverous visage. When I had recovered mastery over my own quaking extremities, I pulled the fur away again, and found only the cushion. It was exceedingly cold and damp to the touch.

No, it did not cease there, Cowley. They have come every night since then—every night without pause, without pity—and I dare not tell a soul: I dare not reveal how every nerve in my body is wound up like a fishing reel—how sustenance is repulsed at the gate of my lips, and sleep is no more than a small, mocking memory. I am wasting, wasting! They have begun to come in groups: first the woman and her daughter together—though *not* together—simply at the same time, on either side of me. Then the next night, they were joined by Albertson, who seemed to walk above their heads—all of them chanting, “*Pray for me, pray for me!*” They took no notice of each other, looked at no one but me with their dead, begging, desolate eyes! They have brought others with them—from the graveyard, perhaps—I know not where—faces I have seen before, congregants long deceased—even a man in the garb of a minister—and, yes, he too was crying, “*Pray for me!*”

I have predicated my life, my work, my hope upon only one thing—a single, incontrovertible precept without

which everything I have thought, believed, taught and done dissipates into odious vapor and meretricious falsehood: that, brother Cowley, is Heaven. Without this, I have nothing to preach, nothing to live for, not a single pillar with which to prop up the temple of my existence. Without this, what is the purpose of being Christian? What is the purpose of being human? God knows, I've done what they ask of me—I've prayed day and night, night and day, prayed without ceasing even as the Gospels command—and yet they come, they come... Good Lord! *Children* Cowley! *Children* as innocent and taintless as flowers, their immaterial eyes weeping flawless, helpless tears—their tremulous little voices pleading, “*Pray for me!*” The spirits of men who I knew to be honest and gentle, women I knew to be pious and charitable, all holding out their incorporeal hands and wretchedly imploring, “*Pray for me!*” As the multitudes came to hear the sublime assurances of the Lord in Galilee and in Jerusalem, so these multitudes come to me, like so many lepers and cripples and blind men and demoniacs—pouring through the casements, creeping through the windows, scurrying across the ceilings, peeking through the drapes—colliding one upon the other, transparency seeping into transparency—a thousand different voices, each repeating the same implacable, unendurable exhortation: “*Pray for me!*” And they are all alone, Cowley. God help us, *they are all, to themselves, alone.*

There must be an end. As I write this, I am watching the passage of night's blue cloak drawn ineluctably across the vast, starry sky. Soon they will come—more than last night—more than ever before—a churning, roiling, suffocating, deafening mass of unappeasable supplicants—their piteous refrain filling every corner of my reeling brain until I fall unconscious, groaning my useless, indiscernible orisons to God. To God, say I? Nay, to *nothing*. To no one. To nowhere. I am going to bed, Cowley. I am going to bed with this hatchet in my hand, and if I cannot fend them off—if I cannot hold them back with living blows against dead non-substance—I will—I must—simply *join* them. I must show them that there is nothing to be done—nothing I can do or say to make their deaths mean anything—to make them find any peace, or rest, or comfort, or understanding. I am going to bed, Cowley....

But dear God—*DIANNE!*

THE END

THE GIRL IN THE GREEN RAINCOAT

A Ghost-story

I:

I had just closed my eyes and allowed my head to sink back into the corner of my hideously upholstered armchair, when my consciousness was recalled ungently by a brief and rhythmical report upon the door. I rose with a single, ridiculously bewildered motion, and—momentarily reacquainting myself with the room—weaved around the box I had been slowly unpacking to inquire after my unanticipated visitant. My finger still pressed between the pages of the last volume I had removed, I felt my heart lurch in my breast when I opened the door and saw Lydia. Her hand was raised to knock again, and at her feet there lay another box. My greeting was a choked ejaculation of incomprehensible alarm, from which I tried, but could not assemble a proper, “Hello.” It sounded more like, “Oh, Hell—!”

Lydia smiled in the way to which I had grown morosely accustomed: a tightening of her already thin lips that conveyed something like timid bemusement, something like the weariness of guilt, and something like the willful suppression of a long-gathering sob. Lydia’s physiognomic arsenal was small but appallingly sophisticated. “I found some more of your books hidden amongst my own,” she said. “The phone has already been shut off at the house, so I thought I’d just bring them here myself. This is it, eh?”

“It?” I asked. “Ah, yes—the cabin; this is it, what little of it there is. I hope you’ll come in and see it. Allow me to carry that box in.”

She would not allow it. I took too long bothering about the book in my hand, having no ready place to dispose of it, and she had already hoisted the carton to her strong midriff and obtruded herself upon the threshold. I made apologetic motions to take it; she ignored them and dropped it on the floor.

“Thank you,” I said.

Lydia wiped her hands against the thighs of her burnt-red trousers, leaving a few finger-width streaks of gray dust, then transferred them to the pockets of her short, heavy jacket, making a wide and restless survey of the cabin, during which she took particular care not to look at me.

“Take your coat off,” I urged, “Have some tea. I’ve just unpacked the kettle.”

“Thank you, no,” she replied rather quietly, “I really didn’t want to stay.”

“Please,” I said, stepping behind her and unconsciously moving to draw her coat off of her shoulders, as I often would do. She ducked away, pulling the coat closed around herself, her eyes big and startled.

“Please,” I said again, “Just five minutes. I’d like to make you some tea. Leave your coat on if that’s what you prefer.”

Lydia straightened and took her eyes from me, her shoulders rising in a meager and tentative shrug. While I turned away to light the kettle, which sat on the miniature stove in the corner, I heard her hard-soled clogs take a few circling steps across the plank floor.

“Cozy place,” she said. “Can you really stand to live in such—confinement?”

Grasping her double meaning, I declined to look over my shoulder at her as I extracted two differently-colored earthenware mugs from their newspaper swaddling, fearing that I would meet her sullen eyes if I did. “All life is confinement,” I rejoined, “from the womb, to the cradle, to the cabin, to the coffin, to the grave. Confinement is what I’m used to; but *loneliness*....”

“You’ll get used to that too,” Lydia murmured. “Anyway, I doubt you’ll be lonely for long. You never have.”

This is how it always began with us: a preliminary *tete-a-tete* of hastening jabs and sharpening nudges, each of us aiming the other toward the same smooth-worn bluff, each of us, I suppose, inwardly pleading with ourselves to forget our pride and yield first. This time I actually *did* yield first—if only temporarily. I said nothing, wanting no victory but the victory of keeping her with me, and of watching her put the tea I was preparing for her to her lips, and of seeing her swallow it. For five years I could have been content, nearly content, with only that. My hands trembled and my mouth grew dry as, my back still to her, I glimpsed the fiery tail of an errant regret flee around the corner of my crowded and cacophonous memory. *I* could have been content.

The silence might have conquered us; I was willing to be conquered—but with a sudden casualness that was

anything but merciful, Lydia said, “I think the place has potential.”

“Potential?” I asked, facing her again. She had crooked her arms against her sides and was examining, with a peculiar whimsy, the strict little loft that overhung the central room, into which I had already deposited a slender mattress and some bundled bedclothes.

“I mean,” she mused, “that I can *see* you here. The almost Waldenesque austerity of it. You always talked about wanting to simplify.”

“I had little choice,” I said. “Not that I’m insensible to the place’s homely charms; they agreed with me immediately. But in all sincerity, this is the only situation I looked into that I was confident I could afford for a while, even if I hadn’t been able to find a job.”

“You never told me you’d quit the newspaper,” Lydia said with an unconcernedness that made my shorthairs stiffen.

“Ah—not completely,” I explained, foolishly embarrassed by what might be conceived of as my first rash act. “When I realized how badly I wanted to get out of the city—when I found out about this cabin and felt myself resolutely attached to the idea of trying to live here—it was clear that I couldn’t stay on the culture beat anymore. The travel would be murderous. They agreed to keep me on in a freelance capacity, though—in case I found anything worth writing about up here in the mountains; a sort of Catskills correspondent, if you like. It’s just a matter of looking for the right stories.”

“Where do you intend to find them—under dead logs?” Lydia scoffed. There was a meanness about her sometimes, of which I hated to be reminded. I must have flushed a little, because her eyes fell away from mine quickly, and she added, “I just don’t see how that equates to a living.”

“There’s something else,” I said, “another little job on the side. I haven’t officially agreed to take it yet, but I’ve been told by my landlady that it’s mine if I want it.” Then I laughed, “My landlady’s rather fond of me, I think.”

The teapot had begun to shudder and squeal atop the stove; I took it up with the sleeve of my sweater pulled down over my hand and emptied the fuming water over the teabags that I’d hung in the cups. “Go on,” Lydia prodded.

“Oh, well, it’s a night-job,” I continued, “looking after a former inn that’s been in her family since the 19th Century. She’s had a lot of trouble keeping permanent residents there, so her son had the idea of reconverting it into a hotel—you know, for tourists who are looking for a ‘particular kind’ of Catskills experience.”

“A *particular* kind,” Lydia repeated amusedly.

“That’s all the lady said,” I shrugged, conducting her toward a seat with a mug steaming in each of my hands. Maddeningly refusing to be made comfortable, Lydia posted herself indelicately upon the chair’s age-worn arm, while I balanced the mugs on two uneven stacks of books and sat down upon a three-legged stool. “It does make me

curious. I'm supposed to go down on Saturday and inquire after the terms of the position."

A palpable silence settled between us again, as I fell inescapably to considering the horrible strangeness of having my wife as a visitor—trying to hold her in place with the ruthless formality of a cup of tea. This is how it had been on our intolerable visits to her father's vast, immaculate apartment, which he had inhabited alone since his partner's illness: a ritual of perfectly-rehearsed, deathly-serious shoptalk, concealing arcane layers of recrimination and odium that lay beyond the reach of any cipher I could apply to it. Now it was us, seeming no more intimate than two polite competitors sitting together outside a casting-call, each of us mutely invoking the gods of failure upon the head of the other.

Lydia held her cup for five minutes without drinking, then, returning it to its book-stack, slid off the chair and thanked me for the tea. I rose and put my hands in my pockets. "Come back anytime," I said.

She shook her head with a forlorn smile, extended her hand in a limp, abortive gesture of farewell, and let herself out before I could get to the door. Listening to her car rolling somberly over the dirt and gravel of the long driveway, I held myself still with my arms crossed about me, and imagined—fantasized—that she was crying.

II

The Hemlock Grove Hotel stands in sulking isolation at the shady terminus of an unpaved carriage trail, the appearance of which has admitted little alteration since the days of the Catskill Mountain Railroad, except that the ruts on either side of its central, sometimes grassy hump, have been widened—though not evened—by the passage of cars. Though the trail is called by the name of Hemlock Grove Drive, its entrance is most clearly marked by a sign reading “Loomis Hill Rural Cemetery, Stay Right.” One turns over the sunken, rusted remnants of the thin railroad, and presently finds oneself at a fork, the left branch of which wends upward through a dim gauntlet of leaning trees, toward the hotel. The right branch, if taken, leads to a disregarded cluster of mossy marble headstones, planted in ascending fashion against an inclined clearing, on a bed of sharp brown grass and moldy tree stumps. Visitors to the cemetery are mystified to find that the trail, rather than encircling the clearing and leading back to the entrance, merely penetrates a short distance into the midst of the graves, and ceases at the steps of a crouching, iron-vaulted mausoleum, over which the name LOOMIS sits in relief, surmounted by a stone decoration in the form of a draped urn. The only mode of exit is to ease one’s car backwards down the crude path, using the fork to turn around in the direction of the main road. I learned this on my first visit to the Hemlock Grove, and could never comprehend thereafter why the graveyard was announced at the roadside, but the hotel was not.

The situation of the Hemlock Grove Hotel is as prodigious as the building's origins are obscure. It stands near the top of a broad hill, closely pushed-upon by the leering rim of the forest, and enjoying nothing that could be regarded as a vista—only forest above and forest below, with the pale stones of the Loomis Hill Rural Cemetery visible from the northern-facing windows of the upper floor, when the branches have been stripped by winter. The architecture, I have since ascertained, is essentially in the Second Empire Baroque style, ensconced altogether by a low wrapping porch, supported by slender columns that culminate in two branches, with heads shaped like acorns on either side. Though it is three stories tall, its flat, federal-style roof lends it an illusion of squatness, and the windows of the second storey, surrounded by their own inaccessible veranda, look something like eyes darkened by the vexed brow of the tall-ceilinged porch. While most of the building is white, the borders of the windows and doors are painted black, as are the lower and upper porch-railings. The settling of the decades has caused the porch to become uneven, so that it rises and falls in demented waves around the façade, with the crawlspace beneath it glowering blackly out at the stiff grass and bristling rosebushes. A thin black design repeats itself around the hotel's brim, presided over by a minutely protruding roof. Almost like an oriental temple, the structure sits at some height above the level of the rather informally-apportioned parking lot, and is reached by a series of steep stone steps that are set into the hillside,

presenting a brief but laborious struggle for lodgers bearing suitcases.

It was at the top of these steps that I was met by the son of my landlady—a thickset man in his mid-forties, possessing an uneasy manner and an uncertain handshake. As he led me inside, he made apologies for the present emptiness of the place, explaining that what restorations had been made to it were completed less than a year before, and that since then his efforts to promote the property had yielded only sporadic interest. He said, however, that word-of-mouth was growing regarding the hotel, which, despite its age and unlikely location, had begun to earn a valuable reputation among a *particular kind* of vacation traveler. I remarked that I had heard as much before, but could not for anything imagine what *particular kind* of traveler it might refer to. He replied with a quick, quivering smile, and a promise to return to the point after he had acquainted me with the premises.

As we walked together through the lower portion of the building, visiting the primly furnished drawing room, the library with its august, glass-faced bookcases, the billiard room with its leather armchairs and generously-sized ashtrays, et cetera, the proprietor (his name was Mr. Krauss) explained that he had made his living as a dealer in fine antiques, and had made it his business—upon rescuing the property from the worst effects of long neglect—to furnish it in accordance with its age. It was built, he said, in 1868, and had functioned mainly as a place of respite for persons suffering nervous

conditions acquired during wartime: a function it retained without significant interruption until the 1970s, when the failing economy and the popularity of newer, more entertaining resort complexes hurried it into obsolescence. I offered a clever observation about the redefinition of relaxation in the latter part of the century, to which Krauss conceded with a strange, sober chuckle.

The guestrooms occupied the second and third stories—we climbed the narrow stairways eagerly, as if in the hope that our footsteps would awaken some overdue slumberer. It was late in the month of October; Mr. Krauss had already begged my understanding for keeping the heat at a modest degree while the place was empty, but my habitual expectation that the upper floors would be warmer than the lower one proved mistaken. A tangible shudder overtook me as we crossed the landing into the second-floor corridor, and, it seems, remained with me until we descended again some fifteen minutes later. The doors to the vacant rooms lay closed and sullen, their numbers posted in old-fashioned gold type, and I confess that my imagination worked itself into a breathless fit, conjuring a century's worth of mournful travelers inside, wearily lifting their heads at the sound of our passing by. With a grand-looking skeleton key that he took from his pocket, my guide opened one of the doors and invited me to take a look. I held my breath as I went in, but released it again to find the room uninhabited and surprisingly pleasant—its queen-sized bed deftly turned down in a mutely-patterned blanket, its hardwood floor graced with

a woven rug of stately design, its dark-stained writing desk in a state of patient expectancy with printed stationary and a shaded lamp. “It’s Mrs. Winslow who keeps our rooms in order,” Mr. Krauss explained, “and Mr. Winslow who cooks the meals and attends to general maintenance. They live in the village and come in whenever they’re needed—a nice retired couple who remember this place from the old days.”

On the third floor, in the master suite at the end of the hall, Mr. Krauss and I looked out from the tall North window, over the bare and browning trees, toward the top of the Loomis mausoleum and the propitiating white monuments that gathered meekly around it. “For the first 75 years or so of its existence, this house was called the Loomis Sanitarium,” Mr. Krauss confided, his voice hushed and reverential. “Loomis himself was a colonel in the Union Army, who—according to tradition—led his own son to his death in a charge against the Rebels out on the Pennsylvania border, just across the Delaware. He came back a transformed man, wasted away after a few months, and was buried in that tomb. His widow, Loretta Loomis, had the hotel built soon thereafter, and spent the rest of her days looking after shell-shock victims both military and civilian—devoted to making this a place of perfect tranquility. She lived in this room, actually, where she could always keep her family members in sight. They say—” But he cut himself short here, and, smiling shakily again, resumed, “Well, come back downstairs and I’ll fill you in on the rest.”

Our interview concluded in the concierge's office, standing behind the great oak counter with its wall of mailboxes and its cabinet full of keys. Having wandered for an hour through a meticulously preserved vision of the previous century, I was startled and—perhaps—a little offended to find a computer neatly concealed behind the desk, with a box-like printer and an imprint-maker for credit cards beside it. In my own cabin, I had resolved to live without any but the most inescapable of modern contrivances—being particularly determined to live without any possible recourse to the demon Internet—and had permitted myself nothing more extravagant than a telephone and a manual typewriter. Lydia had called me an impractical idealist, but concurred that I could not but benefit from “keeping to myself and staying out of trouble.”

Mr. Krauss enumerated the duties of what he referred to as the “evening manager”—the position for which I had been invited to apply. My job, quite simply, would be to *stay awake*—and to make myself available to assist guests in any reasonable capacity, while Mr. and Mrs. Winslow are away for the night. “Most of our guests,” he said, “will be weekend guests—but there will be a few, I expect, who will be interested in staying on for a week or more, depending on their persistence and the extent of their curiosity.”

“Curiosity?” I interjected, “Curiosity about *what*?”

The proprietor sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, I said I was going to tell you,” he began, his

voice hesitant, “so here it is. I had originally intended, against every practical business impulse, to reopen the Hemlock Grove under something of the same pretense for which it was first erected; except, rather than being an asylum for the victims of war, now it would be a retreat for the victims of society—an absolute escape from the pressures and impositions of the modern world.”

I remembered, as he said this, that I had seen no televisions in the rooms to which I had been admitted, nor any radio alarm clocks, nor even any telephones.

“At first,” he went on, “and as one might have unfortunately expected, the model appeared doomed.

Though a sufficient number of visitors passed through my doors to tantalize me with a foretaste of success, my optimism began to crumble as, one after another, my first crop of guests began to check out days before their appointed date of departure, often after only one night—while, even more distressingly, those who remained on for the whole duration seemed to leave in a more harried and disordered state than when they had arrived. From none of them could I—not with any amount of pleading—extract a comprehensible explanation for the precipitated nature of their exit; leaving me with the despairing assumption that, as you thoughtfully suggested earlier, there is simply no place left in the modern world for *true* relaxation—that it is more harmful to attempt to separate modern man from his continuous technological distractions, than it is to leave him as he is—mechanically dissipating his vital energies in answering the demands of

those devices that were supposed to have provided him with greater ease and leisure. I contemplated this ruefully as I went about in preparation of bringing my naïve little experiment to an end, thus returning this splendid old pile to its own decay—when, quite outside of any rational expectation, I began to receive inquiries from an entirely different order of traveler....”

“A *particular* kind?” I ventured.

“A most particular kind,” Mr. Krauss acceded with a note of lamentation. “For these travelers, far from desiring any kind of relaxation or quietude, are—on the contrary—in pursuit of a rather singular form of thrill: namely, that of seeing a ghost.”

A cold jolt seized me at the base of my spine as he pronounced the last word, and I uttered a crude little guffaw to disguise the consequent shiver.

Mr. Krauss, his round cheeks reddening, answered with an unnatural giggle of his own.

“Yes, well, I know the absurdity of it,” he said, passing a nervous hand over the hairless spot at the back of his head, “and my first reaction was one of real offense.

Ghost-hunters—the vulgarity of it! The first few callers I dismissed with utmost indignation, insisting that Hemlock Grove was a place for the soothing of spirits—not for the rousting up of restless ones; and anyway, I’m no subscriber to wives’ tales and fairy-stories. As I meditated over my accounts, however, and began to consider how unpleasant and costly the abandonment of the enterprise would be, I suppose my wits reassembled about me, and I

wondered whether business was not business, just the same.

“This, mind you, was not more than a month ago. Since then I’ve been laboring to adjust myself to the new vision—quietly selecting which of the prospective phantom-chasers—or, pardon me, ‘paranormal investigators’—I would prefer to initiate Hemlock Grove into its weird second life. The first party has now been arranged for the beginning of November—a fairly high-profile team of oddballs from Salem, Massachusetts—and, depending on their level of satisfaction with—*whatever* it is they’re hoping to find—I expect that many more will be eager to follow. The public enthusiasm for this sort of poppycock is, at present, astonishingly high.”

“I think I have a notion of the type of group you’ve invited,” I said, “and my understanding is that they prefer their haunted houses to be devoid of everything living except for themselves. If I’m to be here through the night, won’t it constitute an intrusion upon their operation?”

“I’m afraid,” shrugged Mr. Krauss, “that your presence—providing you accept the position—is a matter of legal necessity. I’ve invested a good amount of my own money—and, I might as well add, my family’s money—into this heap, and under no circumstance can I see my way to simply handing it over to a horde of rampaging crackpots, to do with as they please. You’re an intelligent man, Mr. Drake; I believe I can trust you to keep an alert eye and ear out for anything that might be amiss with any of

these—ah, *investigations*—anything, that is, which could compromise the property. Now, what did you say you did in your regular line?”

“Journalist,” I answered, gazing obscurely at the floor in contemplation of what was being proposed.

“Ah, perfect!” said Mr. Krauss, “Then you’re already accustomed to being in the way.”

III

An opulent golden sun was spending the last of its largesse on the autumn-stricken forest as I made my journey home—or rather, to the cabin that I was now obliged to speak of as ‘home’; I drove down the serpentine highway with my eyes fixed ahead of me and my thoughts storming noisily between my ears. This was indeed a strange turn. The wage that Mr. Krauss had offered me was doubtless rather generous, but still only enough to keep me securely supplied with toilet paper and whiskey, while the circumstances of the position appeared to me as being something less than predictable. What if these initial investigators were to turn up nothing that they could testify to as a haunting? The business trail would quickly grow cold again, and Mr. Krauss would be back in his original predicament—a forgotten little hotel, miles away from anywhere, where not even the dead cared to stay. If, on the other hand, they *did* uncover something peculiar about the place, Mr. Krauss’ beautiful wilderness dream would be trampled to dust by a stampede of

publicity-seeking hacks and hairbrained hobbyists, taking snapshots of floating orbs and jumping out of their beds at every creak in the rafters. There was a cast of dignity about the proprietor that caused him to seem ill-suited for the operation of a paranormal sideshow. For myself, I wondered if I was desperate enough, or stupid enough, to spend all night awake, staring into the ancient shadows of the Hemlock Grove Hotel. I was sure that I was *curious* enough—if there was anything there worth writing about....

I was jarred out of my ruminations by the sight of a dusky figure, small-statured and slowly walking—shuffling, even—along the uneven shoulder of the desolate, undulating country road that led toward my cabin. It seemed late in the day to be traveling by foot down a stretch of highway that pointed to absolutely nothing but a few houses and a million trees for five miles in either direction. There was something in the gait of the figure that assured me of its being a female—a subdued but unmistakable pendulousness of movement that catches the masculine eye like a beacon or a blood-scent. All light and color had abruptly departed from the sky—the conflagrated forest and the pitchy road both oozing together now into an all-embracing pool of gray, against which the figure was a squirming splash of ink. As I neared her, diminishing my speed, she fell under the circle of my headlights and looked back at me, turning her shoulder without stopping. Now I could see that it was a petit young woman, her dark gaze sharp and wary, her

face half obscured by the hood of the oversized, army-style raincoat that she wore, out of the bottom of which poked two gracefully-formed, darkly toned legs. She made no signal to me—divulged no hint of desiring a ride to wherever she could have been headed—but merely traced my eyes as my eyes traced her, and resumed staring at her own feet when I had passed too far to observe her any longer.

As I began to accelerate again, leaving the mysterious walker behind me, the wild glow of another pair of headlights erupted over the head of the hill I was ascending, heralding the form of an ancient blue pickup truck, approaching at a speed that seemed incredible for a 1960s model. Confounded by the sudden blaze of its high-beams, I hit my brakes and veered to the shoulder, my breast locked in the grip of a surprising, incongruous panic. I watched the truck in the rearview mirror, its brakes shrieking as it stopped just after passing the girl, whipped around for a three-point turn, and spun its tires in its haste to haul up beside her. Now there was another shriek—different than any a pair of brakes can make—and when the truck heaved around again and disappeared over the last hill, the girl in the raincoat had disappeared with it. I sat motionless for a moment, trying to find the breath that would push the lingering frenzy of terror from my chest, and, with my hands trembling upon the steering wheel, dazedly drove on.

I pushed my way inside the cabin, letting the spring-hinged screen door crack shut behind me, and laying against the main door until it had clicked fast. *That poor girl*, I muttered to myself, sliding off the door and lunging in the direction of my kitchen table, where the bottle of bourbon I had opened the previous night still stood, three-quarters full, with a tumbler beside it. I poured with a quivering hand—sighed at the primordial heat as it slid over my tongue and sank like a fiery coal in my bowels. *That poor girl*, I muttered, shaking my head.

I was still standing with one hand on the table and the other clutching the tumbler, looking somberly about the naked floor with its avalanche of books, when the telephone rang across the room. I reached it in three short strides. It was Mr. Krauss, wondering—a little anxiously—whether I had thought over my acceptance of the position yet.

That poor girl, was what I was still thinking, but I replied, “Oh, yes—yes, I think it sounds fine. When do I begin?”

“Oh, not for another week, at least,” Mr. Krauss said, “I’m just concluding the arrangements with the group from Salem now. Whatever they’ve heard, it must have been frankly lurid; they do seem *awfully* interested in seeing the place.”

That poor girl, I thought.

“I’ll tell you what, Mr. Drake,” Mr. Krauss continued, “I’ll be returning to the city for a few days over the weekend, but if you don’t mind dropping by the hotel

tomorrow afternoon, I'll see that you're all set up—with the proper paperwork and so on."

"Fine," I said, "that's fine."

"Good, good," said Mr. Krauss. His voice dropped away with a long, tremulous sound that was something like laughter, but more like wheezing.

"Are you feeling all right, Mr. Krauss?" I asked—not altogether sure why I was concerned.

"Oh, yes," he answered, "perfectly all right, thank you, Mr. Drake. I've just been spending a lot of time here at the hotel and—ah—it's rather *isolating* after a while, I suppose—isolating and quiet. Not that I don't like the quiet and all that; you know, that's why I *love* it here. But, ah, in the city—one gets accustomed—you know—to a certain—to the constant—"

"Evidences of life?" I posed.

"Yes, Mr. Drake, I think that's it," he said faintly, "evidences of life."

"Tomorrow, then," I said.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Drake," he returned. "Goodnight."

At two o'clock in the morning, I was at my typewriter, the bottle of bourbon half-empty beside me, my eyes glazing and refocusing over a page on which I had impressed the words "Oh Lydia!" and nothing else. I was wondrously drunk: a condition that I seemed inevitably to find my way into whenever I was alone—and I these days, I was alone most of the time. This—the drunkenness, the loneliness—was Lydia's legacy upon me; it was what she

left me with, though it was nothing she had ever intended to give, and one should think of her as being no less generous or self-sacrificing if, when the tempest of our life together had at last exhausted its elemental powers, loneliness and drunkenness were all I had the strength to carry away with me from the ruins.

Lydia was, to be quite clear, the noblest person I have ever known—possessing an integrity surpassing virtue: an inner truth and force of resolution that stood dauntless and impervious against influence, persuasion, and empirical reason. Her most remarkable trait was that she never lied—was constitutionally incapable of dissimulation—and hence, of self-doubt, and hence of shame. She was in all things absolute. She was almost an ascetic. Absolutely atheistic, absolutely abstemious, absolutely altruistic, absolutely amoral...she was an idol of the old type—immovable, inscrutable, implacable was she.

Yet she had loved me once, in a way that she had never loved anyone before, and I prayed could never love another again. I have laughed myself to tears contemplating what diabolical charms I must have exercised upon her, to have caused her head to fill with such unknown fancies, her blood with such unknown passions, her heart with such unknown sorrows. I have wept myself to sickness recalling the disgraces that I heaped upon her simple, sacred trust. I was weeping and laughing now, with “Oh Lydia!” on the white sheet before me and the bottle growing emptier at my side.

Outside the cabin's wooden walls, a surge of wind swept up from the round mountain-peaks and rattled the treetops like a box full of bones. I was accosted by a vagrant draft that blundered in from some undefended corner and wantonly lifted the hairs of my neck, delivering a shudder that passed through the whole of my frame. I was aware, all at once, of the tyrannical totality of silence about me.

Gathering myself up, I pushed back my chair and made shrift to stand, growing nauseous as my body rose, as by the mechanical exertions of some distant manipulator. I teetered in the direction of the woodstove and found that the fire I had made before midnight had long ago dashed itself out, with only a fraction of the wood having been consumed or even charred: the consequence of my inexperience at fire-building. I opened the door and gingerly reached in, recoiling with a scream when my hand encountered a pocket of embers that were still glowing smartly beneath the central log. Shaking my soot-blackened hand idiotically before me, little sobered by the shock of pain, I struck off in the direction of the bathroom, where I plunged my blistering fingers under the cold, running tap.

It was in the midst of this that I found myself absently engaged in the examination of my own reflection, as it grimaced out at me from the shaving glass over the sink. As the water poured hypnotically over my numb and distant appendage, I was transfixed by what must have been a drunken hallucination: for, though my own

sensations informed me of no alteration in my pained and besotted expression, the face that stared back at me had begun to change visibly, and—most horribly—to acquire an expression of indescribable, uncontainable malice, and loathing, and bestial rage. It was an expression that I could have never imagined myself to have made, for I have never hated anybody as much as my own image, at that moment, hated me. Again, I uttered a cry (though, as I did, the face in the mirror remained still, leering, malevolent)—this time a low and pitiful bellow of inarticulate terror—slammed the tap closed, and reeled from the bathroom.

My mind now seemed clear as if I had spent the night drinking from Mímir's Well, and I went back to my writing desk, where I fell into my chair and slumped over my typewriter with my head in my arms. I sat like this for a minute or two, and then raised myself up, conjecturing that it was perhaps time to go to sleep. Looking down at the paper upon which I had begun to type, I found that something had changed—or, rather, that I must have made some inebriated blunder. For what I had actually written was, "*O hly dia!*"

IV

As I had done since my first night in the cabin, I fell asleep in the dingy, insipidly-upholstered armchair, beneath the plush, quilt-like comforter that a woman-friend had given

me when she heard I was leaving the city. I had installed the mattress with all of its bedding in the loft upon first moving in, but had since left it unmade and unvisited, finding the thought of sleeping in anything suggestive of a proper bed somehow wrong-seeming: fearing, I suppose, that I would feel desolate and ill-at-ease up there, with no other body to pull against my own—no warm, rising stomach on which to lay my hand. I was pitifully unaccustomed to sleeping alone. When I awoke to the sound of crows squabbling outside, my face felt raw with the cold of a night spent without fire, and my first thought was to hurry to the mirror and confirm whether it was still my face at all. I did this, keeping the blanket closed around my shoulders, tripping over its corners as I hobbled over the frigid floorboards to the closet-like bathroom. Nothing was wrong; through the short, white bursts of breath that broke against the glass, I watched my weary-looking features respond faithfully as I made them smile, pout, scowl, fret... I tried, when I had gotten the courage, to in some measure replicate the expression that I had seen on my reflection the previous night, but—as I had feared—I could produce nothing near it. My most disdainful sneer was pettish and theatrical in comparison to that grotesque, withering enmity. Feeling foolish, I abandoned my contortions and went to see about the fire.

While laying balled-up sheets of newspaper down amidst the ashes, I thought remorsefully about the years I had consumed on the culture beat, littering the apathetic metropolis with my pompous copy—my short, black byline

smeared by the dripping juices of a thousand bagels and lox, cast off on subway seats and gathered into rubbish bins, its evanescence mocked by the profanities etched about the pillars of the platform. And yet how many novelists had I interviewed in that time—their names now obscure, their long and delicate labors forgotten, their publishers no longer answering their calls? How many dancers had I watched, flailing their lives away in the face of oblivion? All of us prattling ceaselessly about “our work”—trailing after our fat, shimmering egos like children blowing soap bubbles. I had brought my little manuscript with me, of course—the novel I had been writing since before I married Lydia, its characters all bored to death and fading from the pages, its poignant premise retired to a paradise of mislaid enthusiasms. I had brought it along with my innumerable books—the barely-read, the never-opened; it sat unfinished and inscrutable next to my typewriter, silently defying me with its back turned to the muses. The thought of stuffing it into the woodstove provided me with a moment of unexpressed levity as my stiff, unfeeling fingers fumbled with a box of matches. When I had cajoled the flame into accepting its pittance of kindling, I rose groaningly and ambled to my desk, where my eyes fell on the sheet that still stood against the roll of the machine....

?

THE BROTHERHOOD OF HORUS

A Tale

Apart from the haughty stone edifices now so frequently being erected around the area of the Hudson by the industrious inheritors of old Dutch fortunes, I have often mused to myself that the greatest examples of architectural (and, conjointly, philosophical) medievalism available to the sons and daughters of this youthful colony are its jails. They are without exception many miles removed from the metropolis, and sometimes set upon islands, in which case whole rivers function as all-but impassible moats. The surpassing majority of them are to be found in the countryside, presiding mightily over golden fields and verdant pastures, with ancient forests wreathed about them like the inviolable hunting grounds of the old Norman monarchs. And, like the impressive European seats upon which my comparison is established, they are crammed to their limits with the wildest and cruelest of society's offspring: mean-spirited, selfish, warlike men whose love of violence or lucre overthrew their sense of the common good, and, whether it was someone's life or someone's purse, compelled them to take that which was not due to them. This has always been the distinction between the aristocracy and the servile classes: the ability—whether genealogical or purely psychological—to conclude that the happiness and wellness of others should be justifiably limited,

diminished, or abolished utterly for the sake of one's own. Such is the province of princes and criminals.

My tale is one of a prince of sorts, who, commanded by powers that all my erudition is inadequate to define, became—for society's purposes—a criminal, or, more specifically, a murderer. It may be added, in the interests of my vocation, that Trenton Hoffstedder was also a heretic: a man not merely slack or unorthodox in upholding the faith with which his progenitors had instilled him, but—by the end of his regrettable life—wholly and palpably opposed to it; to be fine, a most willful apostate. There is an argument to be made that the committing of a murder is itself an act of heresy, as it defies one of God's principle Commandments, as set forth in Exodus 20:13, and again in Exodus 21:12, where the reader will recall that the fate of the murderer is inscribed with immutable assurance. How simple our world would be if we were, as in the days of our Puritan forefathers, bound to the unfailing Word of God as our national rule of law! Perhaps then our jails would not need so much to resemble medieval citadels in character and dimension—if earthly justice were left to earthly justices, and divine mercy to He who knoweth the hearts of men, and giveth them their due reward. Still, our judicial machinery is not so hopelessly led by the pliant hand of scientific humanism, as to no longer recognize when a man—however great his standing in society—is guiltier in intention than he is even in deed; and while Trenton Hoffstedder was hurried to the electric chair as an

unrepentant murderer, it is my personal observation that he died the death most befitting an enemy of man and God alike.

Called as I am to be a shepherd over the Lord's flocks, I am not devoid of pity for such cases as Hoffstedder's—for, even if his own story be predominantly the inflated fancies of a maniac, nevertheless it is certain that he had himself suffered terribly. It is, after all, in our times of deepest travail that we are most vulnerable to the insinuations of doubt—too rapt in our own grief and consternation to consider how God's will is so likely to be contrary to our own. Many times I have seen bereaved fathers and husbands turn in sullen futility to their own grief and uncomprehending rage, when all the comfort they required would have been theirs in heavenly abundance, if only they had taken refuge instead in the inexhaustible Hope and Grace of Christ. But men are proud, proud creatures, damned to such heathen stiff-neckedness until the craven hearts with which they are born are supplanted by the meek and childlike organ prescribed by the gospels, and acquired in their faithful study. Hoffstedder—being a man of fortune—was especially given over to the pride of his pedigree, and in his story, to which I am presently arriving, we may again observe—even as the Lord did before us—how “it is easier for a camel to enter the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” What folly and crookedness befalls the Caesars of this world!

My humble preface concluded, I must now show myself to be as much a man of my own word as I am of God's: for it was my solemn promise to Hoffstedder, in those few, heavy hours before his execution, that I would faithfully transcribe the incredible story of his unholy downfall. The task is not such a difficult one, as his tale is as uncanny as it is tragic, and it is only by the grace of God that I will ever have the pleasure of forgetting it. I set it down with a measure of trepidation, trusting God that the reader will take Hoffstedder's report at its value, as the words of a killer of holy-men, a remorseless blasphemer, and a soul blackened by despair and diabolical consorts. Take no relish, I entreat you, in this fantastic relation, for we see that everywhere around us—in the Freemasons, the Rosicrucians, the Theosophists, the Neo-Hellenists, etc.—men like Hoffstedder are endeavoring to resurrect the godless rites of the deep-shrouded past, luring the curious, the idle, and the corrupt to their high-columned lairs of error and infamy. These are trialsome times for every believer, in which we are hard-pressed to maintain our fortitude in the face of a thousand beckoning innovations, distortions, and so-called revelations, which seek—despite their seeming newness and enticing modernity—to repel us into the dark days of paganism and idolatry from which we have long been pleased to call ourselves Delivered.

Also in our midst, along with the Papists, the Salvationists, the Christian Scientists, and their sundry horde of confounded schismatics, is a much older

race—worthy of as much admiration as it is pity—from the unreformed body of which our own Savior long ago sprang, and shewed us the New Covenant by which all are redeemed. I speak of the Jews; the errant nation of Israel, God’s first people, into whose hands the Word and the Law were first mercifully delivered, and whose tabernacles and synagogues are seen to inhabit the same streets as our own churches. Though I acquired a knowledge of Hebrew long ago in my seminary days, my duties as a rural minister preserved me from any living contact with this noble and peace-loving people, such as a city preacher might have enjoyed by dint of its propinquity to his concerns, and its ubiquity within the confines of urbania. And though a few Jews are known to reside in the area of my parish, with at least one family having claim to no inconsiderable wealth, never have their steps crossed the threshold of my sanctuary, nor have I ever considered inviting them into a fold from which they are bound by blood and duty to remain resolutely aloof. It is understood that they are—more than any gentile can properly appreciate—in God’s hands.

So it was that the first time I found myself passing through the midst of the Chosen People of Jehovah, was in the carriage that issued me past the high iron gates of the Auburn Hills State Penitentiary, dividing that somber company which had traveled thence to bear witness to the midnight execution of Trenton Hoffstedder—the slayer of their rabbi. The men were bearded, and their heads circumferenced by black, wide-brimmed hats; the women,

dark of eye and austere of feature, wore black headscarves, bound beneath the chin. Universal among them was a straight, black coat, some of wool and others of fur. They moved out of my way reluctantly and peered with stern, searching looks through the carriage windows as I rode through, while my driver waved them aside, and an uneasy-looking guard told them to continue awaiting the hour of their admittance. One of the men, taking cognizance of my clerical collar, murmured to the rest, "He has come to bless the soul of the Christian who killed our rabbi!" In the swinging light of the carriage lantern, their faces were hard and pitted by deep-driven shadows, convulsively calling to my mind the scene of Christ's sentencing, when the people of Jerusalem crowded about Pontius Pilate's palace and demanded the release of the murderer Barabbas.

I looked up as the gates groaned shut behind me, blunting the sharp complaints of the women, who spoke to each other in a language neither English nor Hebrew. Ahead of me reared the jail—a sprawling leviathan that stood like a curse cast in stone against the sparsely-clouded, moonlit sky—its turreted guard-towers gleaming from within, holding silhouettes of men hitching their rifles and smoking cigars. As executions here were a rarity, I was not often called at so late an hour to offer my services to the condemned, and there was never an occasion on which passing through those bulky cement walls did not bring a shudder like the shadow of death to my spirit—assisted, no doubt, by the windless chill that

permeated the evening air, inside and outside the prison. Welcomed with an officious handshake by the warden, Mr. Frye, I was led out of the broad night and into the grey cloister of the criminal classes. Accompanying our footsteps down the cavernous corridors were the voices of uncountable unseen men—strangely like the wordless musings of crows in a forest canopy, communicating crosswise in all directions with an uneven chorus of coughing and cursing and restless moans. A number of the unshaven denizens, leaning listlessly against the chipped white bars of their shadowy enclaves, pitched cheerless greetings to us as we proceeded—those who spoke being far fewer in rank than those who watched.

With his hands held in the fashion of a general behind his back, nodding here and there at the silent salutations of his guards, Warden Frye sought to warm the air a little by chatting with me about the news of the parish, and gradually bringing the subject around to that of the doomed personage whose final hours I was momentarily to be sharing. He dwelt upon the topic of Mr. Hoffstedder as one much to be lamented, noting that his family had been generous friends of the metropolitan police force, along with other benevolent institutions. “I think you’ll find he’s a true gentleman, Reverend,” the warden observed, “Despite what he’s done, and what he’s come to on that account. Do you know? With all his money and his friends-in-high-places, Hoffstedder never seems to have considered covering the death of the old man up—never tried to make it out as any kind of accident, or blame it on

some unlucky underling, as others in his position have tried to do. The way it's told, he covered the fellow's body with his own sheet, sent straight down to the nearest precinct for a coroner, and confessed the matter as plainly as if he were telling the time of day. The fanciest lawyers in the state were clawing to get placed on his defense, but he wouldn't even talk to 'em. Just went on insisting he was guilty, guilty, guilty—right till the last gavel fell, with the courtroom full of grey-bearded Semites shrieking for his blood. It's even been bandied that he declined a full gubernatorial pardon. I've never seen a man with such blasted stubborn conscience, breeding or no breeding."

"It's remarkable, I admit," I returned, "But what's this I've heard about Hoffstedder being associated with some arcane new religious order?"

Warden Frye gave a baffled shake of the head. "Ah, well, that's the other confounded part of this affair," he said. "Hoffstedder's name is on the books as the founding president of a new society—the Brotherhood of Somesuch-as-I-Don't-Recall—that marks itself out as a religious fraternity, but so far hasn't provided the public with a word about what its aims are, or who's on its membership roster. Before all this rottenness with the dead rabbi, Hoffstedder bought a big lot in the middle of the island, and started building a monumental temple that looks like something dug up out of the Egyptian desert, with all manner of freakish statues, and symbols carved in the pillars and whatnot. What's supposed to go on there, Hoffstedder won't say, and it's been a mighty mark of

suspicion on him from the outset. When the police got a warrant to search the place, all they found inside was a great, empty hall, with more unaccountable figures chiseled into the walls and posts. And then there was his peculiar, heathenish behavior at the beginning of the trial, when he refused—persistently, but politely as you please—to lay his hand on the Bible and swear.”

“Refused to swear on the Bible?” I repeated with agitation. “Why, what reason did he give?”

“I can’t say that I’ve heard what his reason was,” confessed the warden, “But it held up the trial for a good time, until the judge let them bring in something that the defendant *would* swear on.”

“What,” I cried, “Another book?”

“A feather,” said Mr. Frye, again shaking his head. “He would swear on nothing but a single, white goose-feather.”

With a hand on his elbow, I stopped the warden in the midst of the hall, facing him with my eyes squarely upon his. “Sir,” I asked with the greatest gravity, “Are you quite certain that you are not shortly to execute a lunatic? I mean, are you convinced that this man is answerable for his actions?”

“I’ve wondered as much myself,” said Mr. Frye, “But the court pronounced him sane, and I’m obliged to carry out its orders. Still, I can’t help but think that the deaths of Hoffstedder’s brother and son—both in the same day—must have given the poor gentleman enough of a

shock to set anyone somewhat askew, if you see my meaning.”

“I hadn’t heard of this dreadful tragedy,” I said with alarm. “Did it happen very recently?”

“Oh, yes,” replied the warden as we walked on, “Not a month before Hoffstedder murdered the rabbi. It was in all of the newspapers, of course, but the gentleman himself would never speak of it, and it was all handled in the discreetest of manners. The boy and his uncle, it was said, both took ill at the same time, and—no remedy being found—passed away within hours of one another. The Hoffstedders were always fond of travel; it’s likely that the elder brother brought back some foreign fever, which the luckless nephew happened to catch. A terrible pity: it was Hoffstedder’s only child, and quite young.”

“Yes, a great pity,” I confirmed, “But thus do we see the hidden snares one encounters when expending one’s energies and fortunes on an excess of leisure. For all their shifting about from one exotic clime to another, the rich seem only to grow feebler and more sensitive from their constant peregrinations, as compared to the hardness of their simple and steadfast inferiors. To stay where God put you and to eat the bread of one’s own toil is the surest protection from infirmity, I find.”

“I don’t doubt but that you’re correct on that point, Reverend,” agreed Mr. Frye, his countenance seeming to shade a little. I considered that perhaps my observation had caused a prick in his spirit; for he must have known that his comfort and freedom was earned by the hardship

and bondage of those wayward unfortunates, by whose grumbles and sighs he was perpetually surrounded. If war and crime were abolished, the soldier and the jailer would sow seeds instead of bones and sorrows!

Presently we came to the termination of what had seemed to be an interminable hall, where, beyond the interior-facing square cages of the common inmates, a black iron door stood starkly alone against the pale grey cement of the westernmost wall. The guards, posted on each side of the door, having long marked the warden and my advancing voices, straightened as we approached, and greeted my escort respectfully.

“Reverend Cowley is here to administer last comforts to the condemned,” Warden Frye explained, “by request of the condemned’s wife. You’re to give him as much time as he requires; but mind you listen carefully for anything amiss. How are Mr. Hoffstedder’s spirits?”

The guard on the right answered, “He’s been very quiet, sir. He was asked what he’d like his final meal to be, and at first he says that he don’t want anything. We tells him that he has to eat, and so he says that all he wants is some bread and some beer. We tells him that he can’t have any beer, as such intoxicating drink isn’t allowed in the jail. ‘Water, then,’ he says—so we gives him bread and water, just as if he was held up in some old dungeon. We don’t know but that he’s eaten none of it yet, though, sir.”

Warden Frye went to the door and peeked through the grate to the cell within, then stepped away again, shaking his head. “Well,” he ordered the guard, “You go on

and have them bring Mr. Hoffstedder a little beer. There's nothing to be said against a man wanting a little tippie of something before he's sent off to perdition with a bolt of thunder through the heart. Just make sure the other prisoners can't see what it is you're taking to him."

The guard assented and hurried past us down the corridor, his steps registering as a rapid battery of echoes until he reached the main cell block, where the sound was snatched up by a multitude of misery-filled chambers. The warden then turned to me.

"Well, then, Reverend Cowley," he said, in a tone that I—in the morose state of mind that naturally came over me in that place—reckoned as elegiac, "this isn't the first time you've been closed inside this room with a man awaiting death; I doubt that you'll require any further instruction from me. Just knock on the door and call out when you're ready to leave, and do it as soon as you like if the prisoner shows any signs of menace; otherwise, you may accompany him to the electrocution chamber if he so desires."

"I've never borne witness to this frightful new form of execution," I replied, "and I'm quite sure that I'll go to my own grave more peacefully if I never am obliged to—but I'll bring whatever consolation to Mr. Hoffstedder that he's prepared to take from a humble Minister of the Word, and may God have mercy on his poor soul thereafter. It is my belief that the Lord withdraws not his grace from a man even until his final breath, and if the last utterance that crosses the threshold of his thoughts—even though it

never reach his lips—be a confession of sin and a cry for salvation, my heart hopes that the Hosts of Heaven will hear it, and will meet him with rejoicing.”

And though I knew Warden Frye to be a sturdy man—one not easily assailed by sentiments and passions—I could see again that my words had moved him, for there was, in his heavy-browed eyes, a twinkling of reflection—an inward glance toward the nameless Eternal that is every man’s final comfort and foremost dread, from the incipience of consciousness to the final flicker of wakeful life. He nodded once slowly, then ordered the remaining guard to unlatch the door, so that he might precede me into the chamber of the condemned.

“There’s no need, Warden Frye,” I said, “I’m capable of making my own introduction.” So, spying through the grate again to ensure that the prisoner was not crouching somewhere unseen, awaiting the opportunity of a desperate egress, he opened the door halfway and made motion for me to enter.

By an impulse I might bashfully call superstitious, I went in with my Book held tightly to my side, cradling it in one hand and securing it with the other. The cell was small and square, with a single, heavy-barred window set too high up for any mortal man to peer through, and a bare gaslight burning upon the wall. Mr. Hoffstedder made no discernable acknowledgement of my arrival—though he had certainly heard my voice along with the others as we stood conversing outside—but simply lay upon his naked cot, his eyes turned upward to follow the shadows that

shifted lugubriously along the cement ceiling, and were prodded into a frenzy by the opening and the closing of the door.

“Mr. Hoffstedder,” I said, stepping closer to the foot of the bed, “I am Reverend Joseph Cowley, pastor of the First Reformed Church, which stands some seven miles from this place. I was sent here by the request of Mrs. Hoffstedder, that I might minister to your soul in the hours before your final journey.”

“Mrs. Hoffstedder,” said the man upon the cot, neither stirring nor rising, “my wife. Tell me, Reverend, have you spoken to her?”

“I have not, sir,” I replied, “But I was called out of my house by a servant of hers—or yours—who delivered her request and drove me here in what I must presume is one of your coaches.”

“I see,” said Hoffstedder. Then, betraying not a hint of irony, he asked, “You had a comfortable ride, I hope, Reverend?”

To which I answered plainly: “The conveyance was most luxurious.”

“Good,” said the prisoner, and at last he lifted himself lightly upon an elbow, so that his eyes—startlingly blue even in the dimness of the cell—found communication with mine. Again, seeming to intend no jest, he indicated in the direction of a tin tray bearing a loaf, a cup, and a jug, and offered, “Have you dined? This bread smells delicious, though I fear I haven’t the appetite to sample it.”

“I took my supper earlier, Mr. Hoffstedder,” I responded, “thank you.” Knowing little about the condemned man but that he had proposed some manner of sacrilege and murdered one of my distant cousins-of-the-cloth, within myself, I could not help but be impressed by him at this first and so-final encounter. His gentility was not a practiced or laborious gentility, but the kind that could only be inherited after several generations of casual refinement—it showed through his tousled hair and ill-hanging prison stripes—entirely unworried by circumstance. His voice bore the smooth, unconscious carelessness of one who had spent his boyhood wearing the dark-blue jackets of all the “right” preparatory schools, and I could discern from the way that his words faded upon the air—like the dissipation of incense—that he, like me, had been a Harvard man: though of a much newer stamp, and of too far elevated a status to have had intercourse with any of the impecunious divinity students that might have been my successors or protégés there. More than this, Trenton Hoffstedder was handsome—afflicted by none of the hereditary physiognomic *faux-pas* that so often recur in old families of good name, but, having scarcely gained upon his thirty-second year, resembling as much as anything the mold of a young Caesar, with a straight, heroic nose, a strong chin, and a mouth of grace and character. His movements were elegant without being over-proper, and his mannerisms altogether those of a man for whom it has never been necessary to debate his place in the world. Yet

here he was, reposed before me, his hour of death advancing upon every minute, as calm and blithe of spirit as if he were at an outing by the seaside, or exchanging drolleries in a leather armchair of the men's club lounge. I could not yet decide to my own satisfaction whether this was proof that he was crazy, or merely that he was superlatively well-bred.

"Ah, I hope you don't think me uncouth, Reverend Cowley," the doomed man said, a conciliatory smile appearing upon his well-shaped lips, "but did my wife happen to mention—in her letter, you know—just what she wanted you to do here?"

"The letter was quite brief and to-the-point," I answered, reaching into my pocket and producing a slip of rolled parchment. "Here, you may read it yourself if you like—so you will not suppose that I am here upon an errand of my own devising."

"Nothing of the kind, I'm sure, Reverend," Hoffstedder replied, taking the slip from my hand. He scrutinized it a moment, arose from the bed, took a position nearer to the gaslight, and read it aloud:

To the Reverend Joseph Cowley:

My husband, Mr. Trenton Hoffstedder, shall be put to death at midnight to-night, at the penitentiary adjoining your parish. He has lately come to entertain eccentric ideas that are quite inadmissible within the confines of true and conventional religiosity. I request that you visit

him with all haste and assist him in amending his truancies whilst they are yet reparable. If his obstinacy persists (for he is a proud man), then leave him to his darkness, for he is not to be pitied. 'Let those who have ears hear.'

Sincerely yours, Mrs. Elsinore W. Hoffstedder

“Ah, there’s my Elsie,” Hoffstedder sighed, “She never lost an opportunity to expound her sober and sensible domestic jurisprudence.” He rolled the slip again, and began to pass it abstractedly back into my waiting hand, only to withdraw it decisively, saying, “Actually, Reverend, you won’t mind if I keep this, will you? It was written in her own hand, after all, and will be a solace to me in her absence.”

“I don’t mind, naturally,” I answered, “But will Mrs. Hoffstedder not be present to witness your—that is, eh—your *departure*?”

“Goodness, I should think not!” Hoffstedder exclaimed, almost jovially, “The poor, good woman’s seen enough horrors by this time, wouldn’t you say? No, I’ll leave it to that funereal pack of prowling Israelites—who have doubtless gathered in force outside by now—to watch with moistened lips as I’m sizzled like a Passover pot-roast! Elsie Wilcox, the former Mrs. Hoffstedder—childless, and now so infamously widowed—is in her ancestral home in Philadelphia, taking sanctuary from the journalists. By the gods, I hope she’s

conquered her abstemiousness and forgotten herself in a barrel of good brandy already!”

This last remark he made almost fondly, as if, in the mounting hysteria that is typical to those who have their own demises in view, he really did hope that his wife were soothing herself at some delirious Dionysian fount.

“I have just lately been informed of the passing of your son, and your brother with him, Mr. Hoffstedder,” I thought it meet to say, so returning the fellow to a graver state of mind, “And I hope you will permit me to offer those consolations that are the imperative of my estate, by directing you to the means by which you and your unfortunate kin may yet be reunited.”

Hoffstedder gave an uncanny little laugh and held his palms up before the thin gas flame, as if to draw a little warmth thereby. “All right, Reverend,” he said, “But pray, how much longer have we got till midnight?”

Taking out my watch and advancing into the light, I answered, “Scarcely more than two hours, sir, and I urgently suggest that we spend it applying ourselves to the Word of the Lord. For while Christ entreated us to be always ready to meet Him, you have the unlikely benefit of foreknowing the moment of your judgment, and time enough to make some meager preparation.”

“What luck, eh?” said Hoffstedder, smiling cannily.

At that moment, when I was about to open my Bible to a point in the Psalms where I normally resort on these occasions, we both turned at the sound of the warden’s voice booming through the grate.

“Is all well in there, Reverend?” he called.

“All’s well, Warden, thank you,” I responded.

“Very good,” he rejoined, “Kindly stand away from the door, if you please. We have procured the prisoner his desired refreshment.”

There followed a great scraping and clanging of the latches; the door swung open with a mournful wheeze, and a table was rolled in containing a cask and two tin drinking vessels. Stationing it at the center of the cell, the warden directed a guard to bring two straight-backed chairs, and stood beside the convivial arrangement with his hands at his hips. “I didn’t think it fit to deny a man of quality his last request,” he said, his conscientiously-groomed mustache twitching upon his lip. “I can’t presume to say whether it comes up to your accustomed standard, but may it be a balm to you in your hour of darkness all the same.”

“Mr. Frye,” said Hoffstedder, “Whatever awaits me when my little lark upon this earth has ended, I will not forget your kindness to me, nor will I neglect to stake my humble word on you before the scales of eternal judgment. It would please me greatly if you would join me in raising this first, grateful ablution before the gods.”

“Mr. Hoffstedder,” replied Mr. Frye, “The honor is mine.” So saying, he filled each cup from the spigot upon the cask, handing the first to the condemned. Both standing stiffly with their chins and goblets raised, they made their toasts, like two boastful Norsemen in a rancorous mead-hall.

“To your health and good fortune,” said Hoffstedder.

“To a quick death and a happy hereafter,” said the warden. They finished their draughts in a single motion and set the empty cups with satisfaction upon the table. Then, exchanging with Hoffstedder a nod of mutual recognition, which he repeated to me, he waved for the door to be opened, turned gallantly upon his heel, and left the prisoner and me alone.

“Beer,” said Mr. Hoffstedder, “Is the most ancient and beneficial of refreshments—older than wine and safer than water. It is known that the earliest priests of Egypt gave beer as an offering to the gods, and their temples held strict monopolies upon its manufacture, even as the monks of Prussia and Belgium do today. The scribes wrote odes to it and the Pharaohs stocked jars of it in their magnificent, pyramidal sepulchers. Our Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon forebears drank it both for health and in times of celebration, making gruel from it in the morning, and growing gay from it in the eventide. Fortunes are gathered and lost, kings are diademed and deposed, gold is gathered in one generation and gambled away in the next, but beer! Beer is everyone’s birthright. Have a seat, Reverend Cowley. Join me as I make ready to join the ancestors.”

Seeing that he would not sit until I had preceded him, and feeling that his encroaching fate endued him to a measure of indulgence—however wasteful—I seated myself before the uncomely table, and watched as he did the same. Forthrightly, he filled the cup from which the

warden had lately drunk, and set it before me, before drawing out another cupful for himself.

“Now, Reverend,” he said in a tone of chiding admonishment, “I must insist that you take a drink with me. Am I not a man about die? Why, even Jesus drank with the centurions and tax-collectors to whom he sought to minister.”

While a pool of froth overreached the brim of my cup and pooled in reconstituted form about its metallic circumference, I removed my Bible (which I had set down) nearer to the edge of the table and said, “Mr. Hoffstedder, the hour advances. It is time to talk about your soul, and we cannot talk with our mouths full of barley-swill.”

“Mr. Cowley,” replied Hoffstedder, “I have two souls. Which of them would you prefer to discuss first?”

“Two souls?” I said, again examining his eyes for signs of deep-lurking mania, “I fear I don’t quite apprehend your meaning.”

“I cannot suppose you would,” Hoffstedder returned. At once it seemed that all the fair-natured congeniality with which the impeccably-bred Mr. Hoffstedder had at first presented himself had slipped away, as an orator slips behind a curtain at the conclusion of his monologue, to be replaced by a man much older—and, despite the presence of the rank-smelling beer—far more sober than the original. This man’s brow was crossed and overcast, his hands curled about the tarnished hull of his tin cup, his whole aspect seeming to fade into a jaundiced, dull-saffron hue, appearing sunken and melancholy where

once it had been so youthful as to nearly make one forget where one was, and for what one was waiting.

“This drink disagrees with you, I think, Mr. Hoffstedder,” I said, pushing my own cup aside with a single finger, “It goes too swiftly to the brain—inclines one’s contemplations to gloominess and one’s bowels to irregularity. Come, while we still have time, let us put away the vanities of worldly men, and find our succor and deliverance in the eternal Word of God.”

Mr. Hoffstedder regarded me steadily from under his worried brow for several long moments, then pushed his chair back across the rough stone floor, standing up with his back half-turned against me. I wondered in this moment if his predilection for the attacking of holy men extended so far as to include fellow Protestants, and I gathered myself to cry out if such a need were to arise.

“Reverend Cowley,” he said, though not speaking in my direction, “Do you know for what crime I am to suffer electrocution in two hours’ time?”

“I am told that it is because you took the life of a Jewish clergyman—a rabbi, as they are called,” I answered honestly.

“And was anyone so accommodating in his explanation,” he pressed on, “as to say for what cause I committed this ecumenical outrage? Did anyone proffer a motive?”

I halted for a moment as the realization took sudden hold of me. “Why, no,” I said with candid surprise, “I never was provided with that portion of the tale,

indispensable as it now seems. I suppose I assumed that it was because you owed the gentleman money—his people being widely known for their usurious lending habits.”

“Sir,” said Hoffstedder as he turned to face me, “my elder brother perished six months before the murder was committed, leaving me enough in cash, bonds, and holdings to buy every spire in Moscow, if I so wished—or every ass in Jerusalem. Even if I were so gravely in debt to anyone—Jew or gentile—do you really suppose that I would find bald-faced manslaughter more expedient than simple remittance? And do you think that I’d be enough of an imbecile to confess to it afterwards, if my life were at all valuable to me?”

“Are you attempting to tell me, Mr. Hoffstedder,” I asked, “now, at the very hour of your execution, that you are not guilty of the crime to which you have persistently confessed—and for which, it has been rumored, you have even refused official pardon?”

“No,” cried Hoffstedder, “I killed him! I killed him with the same delight as any man would kill his tormentor, his afflicter—the murderer of his brother and his child!”

Now Hoffstedder cast himself upon his cot and covered his face with his hands, and now he pressed his fallen bangs back over his disordered head, and now he jumped up and tore his pitiful chalice off the table, tipped its contents down his straining throat, and gripped it in his fingers as if reliving the strangulation of his attested victim, his attested enemy. I sat in astonished silence, not knowing whether to call for a guard or to take the man in

my arms, and so allay his distress with a calming fraternal embrace.

Coming to himself after swallowing another cupful of beer, Hoffstedder returned to his chair, took the Bible, opened as if by instinct or long experience to the Book of Exodus, and then closed it again with a snort of contempt. “This book,” he said, “was written by many hands, and many eyes have read it, including my own—seeking in its pages that which is called Truth—that is, the reality together with the ideal—the way things were, the way things are, the way things should be, and the way things must be. They say that it is an ancient book, and that the Truth it contains is timeless and immutable. Do you hold this to be so, Reverend?”

“Without reservation,” I replied, “I do.”

“*Of making many books there is no end,*” he said, “The words of Solomon, Reverend Cowley. But what if this, too, is only one book of many? What if many books came before this one—books containing a Truth that shows the ‘truth’ of this book to be false, or only partially true?”

“You have quoted from the Book of Ecclesiastes,” I responded, “It goes on to say, ‘*and much study is a weariness of the flesh.*’ Solomon is warning the reader that the wisdom of men is ephemeral—that one needs no other knowledge than that which is contained in the Word of God. Practically speaking, this is quite true—and at this moment, sir, there is none for whom it is truer than for you.”

“But look,” cried the prisoner, opening to the final third of the Book and thrusting it before me with his finger quivering upon the page, “Even after this is said, the book goes on, and on, and on, until one whole volume of books is concluded, and a whole new volume begins—the New Testament following the Old—which partly affirms and partly negates that which was written in all the books that came before! So which is the truer of the two—the newer or the older?”

“None is truer than the other, my friend,” I answered, “It is one covenant coming in the place of another, which has passed away. The first is retained merely so that the second can be better understood—though I confess that in unpracticed hands, it can sometimes run to the opposite effect, confusing rather than elucidating.”

Hoffstedder closed the Book again definitively and pushed it over to my side of the small table. “Since I’m about to die anyway,” he said, his schoolboy smile returning upon contorted—if still pleasant—lips, “you’ll forgive me if I say that it’s all rot and rubbish—layers and layers of rot and rubbish poured out over mounds and mounds of rot and rubbish beneath.”

“If that’s truly what you believe,” I said ruefully, “I fear it will make little difference whether I forgive you or not.” Recalling the injunction of the letter—that I ought to “leave him to his darkness” if “his obstinacy persists,” I now firmly suspected that this miserable creature was playing a familiar game with me—goading me into arguing against his preposterous assertions merely as a test of his

own long-neglected rhetorical acumen. I made ready to rise and be away.

“My wife,” began Mr. Hoffstedder, apprehending my intentions with a perspicacity nearing clairvoyance, “whatever her pious purpose, did well in asking you here, Reverend Cowley; and whether or not you return to your pillow this evening satisfied that you have given any salve to my wounded soul—or souls—I give you my word that I will make your journey worthwhile. If you can forgive me for so crassly impugning the veracity of your Holy Book (for you know that I am a troubled man), I would be much indebted to you if you were to stay with me in this last hour of my accursed life, and hear of that which I have never confessed before, and shall never be able to confess again.”

“Sir,” I replied, “God alone knows the content of your heart, and He alone can deduce the cause of your impertinence. I came here with no purpose other than to provide consolation and guidance to you, and to answer the request of your wife, the extent of whose grief it is impossible for any mortal to estimate. Though the nature of your crimes, your sins, and your doubts are between you and your Creator, I will stay and hear your confession, in the hope that you will die a freer man by telling it.”

Hoffstedder took leave of his chair and offered me a cigarette from a case he had withdrawn from his pocket, which I declined in favor of my own tobacco and pipe. He passed over to the gas flame, lighting his own cigarette at the jet, and for nearly a minute we both watched

contemplatively as our merging threads of smoke slithered through the orange atmosphere and diffused against the ceiling.

“Have you anything with which to write?” He asked finally.

“My mind is a tablet,” I answered, “I’ll forget nothing that you tell me.”

“But will others believe what you report,” He returned anxiously, “When it is too late for me to either alter or corroborate your recollection? For it is likely that what I am preparing to relate to you will chafe somewhat against the limits of your credulity.”

“Mr. Hoffstedder,” I replied, “you need not doubt that I am both trusted and trustworthy.”

Returning to his seat and swallowing half a cup of beer, then propitiating his inner Oracle by means of a second cigarette lit upon the tip of the first, Trenton Hoffstedder leaned back and began his incredible and most tragic narrative.

THE TRUE CONFESSION OF TRENTON
HOFFSTEDDER,
MADE IMMEDIATELY BEFORE HIS EXECUTION BY
THE STATE OF NEW YORK,
AND FAITHFULLY RECOUNTED BY REV. JOSEPH
COWLEY, D.D.

Though only two years apart in age, no pair of brothers since Jacob and Essau were more different than my

brother Cassius and I. As a child, his domain was the library, and my father—a man never much given to letters and study himself—was frequently at a loss to find Greek and Latin tutors with the stamina to keep pace with Cassius' voracity for new knowledge. He was not, despite this, of the Renaissance breed that holds science alone as holy, for he saw the world as an ever-unfolding romance of gods and heroes, quite baffling our father and mother with his love of pious ceremony, memorizing the liturgical calendar at an early age, and delighting in his private celebrations of the obscurest and most insignificant of saint's and martyr's days. Cassius was a dreamer who dreamt ever backwards, caring nothing for any present-day news or modern discovery (unless it was archaeological), and—most distressingly—caring even less for the paper mills and the fortune derived from them that, as the eldest child of the Hoffstedder clan, he was intended to inherit. In a poorer family, perhaps in a medieval village somewhere in provincial France, he might have been held up as a sort of ecstatic visionary, obsessed with all things grandiose and mythical; but for our father, he was a puzzle and a disappointment, wholly useless as any sort of businessman.

An early and indelible shame came to the family, when, at the age of fifteen, Cassius was banished from boarding school in the middle of the year, not for any delinquency in his studies—for in those he excelled to an almost supernal extent—but for appearing to suggest some manner of heresy when in discussion with one of the

chaplains. The headmaster—a clergyman, as all of them are, and exceedingly punctilious in his orthodoxy—heard of the conversation, and, calling the boy to account, was unable to extract a confession of error. I never knew what the quibble was over, exactly, but it was certain from that moment that Cassius was fated to follow his own course in life—to be an *iconoclast* in the original sense of the term: a seeker of truth in places where truth is already assumed by all but himself.

My own path to manhood was, by comparison, far more conventional, and immeasurably less dramatic. While I held a certain awe for my brother, as younger siblings generally do, I could never be anything like him, nor could I at all times sympathize with his eccentricity and his adverseness to accepting Reality as the great mass of us believe it to be, and cause it to appear. (It is a fantastic statement, I understand, but as Cassius often explained it to me, he was endowed with a persistent and ever-increasing sense, confirmed by a number of the German philosophers, that Being itself is only so “real” as it is held in compact to be by those who experience it; that humanity, which is half animal and—we might say—half god, lives only partly in the world of incontestable matter, with the remaining part existing in a state of perpetual self-creation, and in subtle communion with metaphysical powers beyond our conscious understanding. At least I recall him saying something to this effect, with more or less embellishment, as the occasion allowed.) Getting on in the world and with other people was always devilishly

easy for me, I have to admit, and I never was bothered by a moment's inclination to look beyond or—shall we say—*beneath* the pleasures, diversions, and commonplace responsibilities that arose within arm's reach of me. I was, I suppose, the answer to my father's wish (though as yet unconceived at the time of my birth) for a son to whom he could entrust the family business and the family name. I don't mean to say that I was in the least bit industrious or rapacious, as my father was; only that I was happy to adopt the world wholly as it was granted to me, occupying the part of the good-natured and sensible executive playboy, and having just enough wit and charm to keep an even pace with the high-rolling, modern society around me. I developed naturally into a man for and of my times, and as my brother receded into his secretive world of study and rumination, I stepped handily into place at the head of affairs, taking the same legal degree that my peers took, apprenticing myself to my father's office just as they did to their fathers' offices, and learning like all my peers to be an easy-going manager of everyday concerns. I danced well and spoke well, made sound decisions and advantageous alliances. By the time I was out of school, it was broadly accepted that the Hoffstedders had only one son.

Despite my unchallenged rise to succeed my father at the head of the company, Cassius bore me no jealousy, and was seemingly relieved to be able to conduct his life privately, far outside the scrutiny of society. He lingered for a long time at the university, quietly collecting two

master's degrees, followed by a doctorate, in various subjects relating to history, philology, and religion. He lived contentedly in his own apartments, taking a modest allowance from my father and lecturing upon obscure topics—though his natural timidity, reclusiveness, and penchant for cherishing odd and unpopular notions ensured that his talks were little-attended and hurriedly dismissed.

Then, almost without notice, Cassius vanished. In a telegram to the family, he explained that he was taking what he called a “pilgrimage to the East,” having found the libraries of Harvard inadequate to supply him with—in his words—a “satisfactory Truth.” He was at this time twenty-five, and I was twenty-three; for the next six years, the sole word we had from him was in the form of occasional telegrams, coming as rarely as twice a year, and bearing messages to the effect of, “I am well. Research is costly. Please send \$5,000.” Then an address would be given to a hotel in Palestine, or Alexandria, or Iraq. Father of course blustered and refused, insisting that he didn't know what the money was being spent on—whether it was even going to Cassius, or to some band of Bedouin kidnappers, holding the rich American for ransom at the point of a scimitar. But Mother invariably prevailed upon him, saying that whatever the case, there was no other way to assure that their firstborn son still lived. Inquiries were sent to his colleagues at the university, but none of his fellow scholars ever heard from him, nor were they aware of the nature of his “research.” Our father went so far as to

address correspondences to the various embassies in the area of Cassius' purported movements, only to be informed that none of them had any "official knowledge" of the presence of an American named Hoffstedder within their borders. Newspapers in New York and Massachusetts would, with more or less annual regularity, publish fantastical speculations upon the fate of the man they came to call "the Lost Hoffstedder," some advancing Father's theory regarding the sword-wielding nomads, others proposing that he had been converted to Mohammedism, and was wearing out his days muttering orisons in Arabic and buffeting his forehead against the floor of a mosque, while others swore on good information that he had become a depraved hashish-eater, and was using his inheritance to finance his own personal harem, with marble fountains, veiled Oriental nymphs, and turbaned eunuchs to stand guard over all, jewel-hilted daggers tucked into their long crimson sashes. The celebrity that he lost by removing himself from New York society, Cassius regained while abroad by the simple accident of being young, wealthy, and utterly unavailable for comment.

But for this additional degree of publicity, and perhaps because of it, my own life in my brother's absence was as pleasant and unobjectionable as anyone's in the city. I flourished easily in my father's office, adopting the language of power and profit, and dutifully accepting the principles and dogmas of my class—that we are the remarkable and the talented ones—the men appointed by

God to create and to destroy—the men for whom other men, littler men, too many to know, are grateful to labor, and live in hunger, and die of sickness and exhaustion on the floors of reeking tenements. I spent my leisure in the clubrooms and ballrooms, surrounded and celebrated by my happy and handsome peers, followed by the fond, calculating eyes of pearl-decked dowagers and their slender-throated daughters, obtaining coveted introductions and dispensing address cards, printed on the company's finest stock, from a solid silver case bearing a stylized monogram that was designed by special commission. The same monogram was imprinted upon my professional stationery, over letters written mostly by other men, regarding details of business that I was careful not to understand so well as to become bored by them. Miss Elsinore Wilcox was the sister of Augie Wilcox, a chum from the university whom I visited in Philadelphia, then took a country holiday with on the farm that his family had begun with before the Revolution. She and Augie were far better riders than I, and after a morning out with the hounds, on which I had been thrown twice and trodden on once, I made such a pathetic sight—with my waistcoat all sodden and Elsie's own handkerchief pressed against the gash on my temple—that she found my proposal of marriage impossible to repulse. I was later informed that the whole expedition had been an act of collusion between Augie, who knew that I fancied his sister and detested horses, and his father, who fancied me and knew which horse to put me on. Elsie and I were

married two years after Cassius disappeared, and our only son, Albert, was born two years after that. He had her brown hair with its thick waves, and an exact stereotype of my nose becomingly affixed between blue, studious eyes, like my brother's.

The thoroughness of my contentedness both professionally and domestically having by now been adequately described, I will advance my narrative to the circumstances of my inadvertently illustrious brother's return from the East, as I have said, soon after the sixth anniversary of his departure. I speak of my "brother's" return, though, to speak in earnest, the Cassius who arrived upon my doorstep unannounced and unanticipated three years ago was in practically no respect the same Cassius whom I had last seen anxiously treading the cobblestones of Cambridge. Physically, one could see that his features—his brow, his nose, his mouth—were unmistakably those of the former man; but all now was overtaken by a prodigious growth of beard, which consumed a face made as taut and brown as parchment by a relentless desert sun, and creased and cratered by the lashings of numberless sandstorms. And his eyes! How shall I begin to describe them? Once so mild and questioning, they now contained a severe and almost repellant knowingness, conveying the fearsome sense that, rather than seeing what was present before him, Cassius now saw nothing but the distant past, obliviously reciting its own ineluctable doom in variegated shadow-patterns

against a timeless and impermeable wall. In short, his appearance had transformed from that of a meek and shuttered scholar, to that of a sage, seasoned by arduous travels, and laden with the secrets of the East.

The manner of my brother's return was as enigmatic as the nature of his long sojourn. He came, as I have said, without any note or messenger preceding him—without even his accustomed telegram—ringing the bell of our Manhattan townhouse, where we encamped during most of the colder months, and announcing himself to the servant as “a kinsman to the Master.” It was somewhat after eight o'clock in the evening; I had been reading the newspaper, according to my custom, while Elsie sat across from me, book in hand, her intelligent eyes meditating upon the lively hearth. Little Albert, of course, was asleep in the nursery upstairs. I went out to meet the visitor with my pipe still in my mouth, although it nearly fell to the floor when I saw him in the foyer, looking haggard and fantastical in a wide-brimmed traveler's hat and dust-covered greatcoat, a single battered trunk standing at his side. I was almost at a loss to recognize him until I heard his voice—but even this was lower and more jagged than it had been six years before, and almost imperceptibly accented by a mingling of extraordinary Oriental tongues. When I saw that it was Cassius, I ran to him and clasped his rough hands in mine, and we grinned at each other for many long moments, tears standing in shining columns upon the lashes of our eyes. Over and over I repeated his name, quite unable to summon any

other words—so long had it been since I had addressed him with my own lips, or held his worthy visage in my gaze. He surrendered his hat and coat to the mystified houseman, and I almost pitied him for the frayed and faded suit he wore, though he asked no forgiveness for his appearance, and in fact seemed rather majestically aloof to the astounding and abject picture he presented, standing amidst the marble and crystal opulence of my hall. The trunk with which he came he would by no means allow the servant to bear away, insisting that it remain at his side. Peering out the door, the man was dumbfounded to find that no carriage waited upon Cassius, and that he had come with no other portage than that which carried himself.

Of all the nights of my life, that first night of my brother's abrupt return was surely the most singular, the most momentous—for from it the remainder of my life would proceed as from a fork in a heretofore unswerving footpath. Destiny spread her darkening wings over us as we sat and spoke that night, and even as we slept, the ground beneath our beds—the foundation upon which the whole of our easy existence had so soundly been planted—began quietly to rustle and fester with unimaginable whispers, conspiracies, and secrets of unfathomable antiquity and—outrageous as it sounds—*cosmic* significance. As I brought my brother in to meet my wife for the first time, the astonished woman arose from her chair with a mixture of horror and curiosity, imagining at first that I was admitting some

manner of indigent or vagrant. At receiving the true explanation, she extended her hand excitedly, and my brother bowed fully before her, as a visiting dignitary might before a sultan. Coffee and sherry was brought in, and Elsie and I listened in taciturn wonderment as Cassius recounted the story of his return to the West, which had begun months before at a port in Tripoli, whence he fled in the company of a caravan traveling out of Cairo. With the help of some merchant friends, my brother—who had since adopted the name of *Tariq-al-Irfan*—was concealed for many days in a cartful of sheepskins, before gaining passage on a cargo vessel tracing the Barbary coast, passing through the shoulder-blades of Gibraltar, and eventually landing in Lisbon. From Lisbon he sailed to London, and in London, still secure in his anonymity and posing as a migrant Turk, he paid the sum of what remained from the expense of his researches to procure a place on a ship destined for New York, where he had arrived the previous day in his present condition, contriving to evade the inquisitions of customs officials, and hence seeking—through the subtlest possible means—to discover the address of his brother, his “only trusted kinsman.” When Elsie and I naturally displayed our curiosity as to the identity of Cassius’—or *Tariq-al-Irfan*’s—suspected pursuers (“assassins” as he called them), and the object (ostensibly contained in his closely-guarded traveling trunk) of their pursuit, my brother waxed silent—his sharp eyes flaring and casting about into the corners of the room, as if the shadows were

creeping with undisclosed auditors. “I carry with me,” he said in a whisper, “the key to a most terrible and ravaging knowledge. The question that I have countless times asked myself, after coming to this knowledge, is ‘Who is *not* my enemy?’”

At last the hour grew insupportably late, and Elsie, who had held my hand tightly throughout my brother’s uncanny relation, began demurely to detach herself in an effort to cover her yawns. (As a mother, I often thought, she rather over-expended herself in attending to our boy.) Before we retired, and “Tariq-al-Irfan” was conducted to the finest of the guestrooms, our celebrated visitor bade us most gravely to swear that we would keep both his American identity and his presence in the city an unutterable secret, even to his parents, who still fretted over him while passing their days on their country estate. We both perplexedly assented—I doing so only with the assurance that he would not interminably keep his great discovery, however awful, from me. So our promises were exchanged, and so we went dazedly to our luxurious beds, never again to awaken in the Garden of Innocence from which we had been involuntarily thrust.

The most preposterous of imaginings could not have conjured for me the extremity of alteration that my dear brother suffered—if suffer he did—by his exposure to the hot, heathen winds of the arid East. While I, his only brother, was uniquely disposed to recognize in him the same earnest and contemplative Cassius that had vanished

half a decade and more before, those—like Elsie—who had never known him previous to his eventful return, were scarcely able to detect the thread of subverted personality that linked the hermetic and closet-bound Hoffstedder of whom they had eulogistically heard, to that of the wild-eyed prodigal who had now arrived in his stead. While marriage, fatherhood, and the constant concerns of the family business had all done their part in tempering the once-gamboling and indolent spirit of my youth, my elder brother seemed to have been contrarily roused to a new and heretofore unsuspected state of irrepressible, almost maniacal vigor by his travels. Cassius, by way of example, had been a paragon of careful sobriety, rejecting anything that might pollute his mind or excite his spirits; but “Tariq-al-Irfan” loved and imbibed wine continuously and unreservedly, drinking it interchangeably with a thick, diabolically potent kind of coffee, into which he meticulously instructed our most trusted servant to mix a variety of blood-stirring spices. Having once loved to be surrounded by books, lamps, and the somber effects of long study, he now quickly transformed his living quarters into a retreat of dreamlike pleasures and luscious revelries, replacing chairs and desks with pillows and divans, covering the windows with rosy-hued screens, and burning bronze bowls full of sweet, intoxicating incense, which induced the interloper to feel partly as if he were sinking, and partly as if he were floating away....

THE VIRGIN MARGARITA

A Sketch

Note: The greater portion of this story has been substantially revised from its original version, whereas the latter few pages remain as they were first written; not because they could not have been improved, but because I was abandoned by the inclination to attempt their improvement. It is best, I think, to consider the piece simply “unfinished.” -DTT

Paddling far out on some soporific reverie, induced largely by the effect of colored raindrops pooling around the flashing figure of an outwards-facing neon sign, the minister had not thought for a long while about taking out his watch. The ice over which his scotch had been poured had melted, shrinking into a few swirling pebbles, then passing unheard into the amber fluid. Like the rain itself, it was warm and watery when the minister brought it to his lips.

The bar had been nearly lifeless when he had gone in and ordered the first of three drinks. It was the emptiness and the absence of music that had drawn him; the silence of the place sang to him and made him stay, when he would just have soon taken one drink and returned to the

room where he had left Rosalind sleeping. There was only the murmur of a football game on a broad screen suspended above the wine glasses and the tumblers, which a couple of old men on stools stared up at without speaking. The minister would be at peace so long as nobody turned on the jukebox. With that in mind, he had taken his drink to the rearmost booth, within clear sight of the terrible machine, so that he could swallow what remained in his glass and hasten to the door at the first sign of someone fishing out a quarter. When he found that the coin-slot had been gagged by a line of tape and affixed with a handwritten notice reading “BROKEN,” he sighed a hallelujah and tasted his whiskey with gratuitous contentment.

For seven days—a time accounted by him to have been interminable—he had manfully shunned the comforts of whiskey, never feeling as if his mission could suffer a moment’s recklessness. He had driven almost without ceasing, sleeping in snatches, wherever he could park with the most discretion, keeping to the obscurest of back-roads, while Rosalind puzzled over a blanket-sized roadmap—following web-like threads of pinkish crimson with a slight, tapering fingertip—humming endlessly along to the radio that she swore she couldn’t live without. After crossing into New York, the minister had paid sixty-nine dollars of God’s money for a motel room with its own external entrance and a clear view of the road, and had watched a national news broadcast from beginning to end while Rosalind took the first turn in the shower. Nothing

touching them was mentioned; America suddenly seemed vast and mercifully unconcerned.

Rosalind had been so overcome by weariness that she fell into bed the moment she emerged from the shower, uttering a groan of joy at feeling a real mattress bouncing beneath her. “After I’ve cleaned myself up,” the minister told her, “I think I’ll step out to the tavern across the road. You’ll be fine by yourself for a few minutes, won’t you?”

“Sure,” Rosalind muttered into her pillow. When the minister stepped back out of the bathroom, his body washed and his hair combed, Rosalind was asleep, with the little clock-radio piping almost inaudibly beside her head. She had divulged to him once how her foster parents would punish her by locking her in a sound-proofed room for days at a time, so that they wouldn’t hear her crying—and now silence itself seemed like a punishment to her. *Just one drink*, the minister had promised himself as he closed the door and checked its soundness, *just one taste and I’ll run right back*. His hand trembled on the knob when he thought about leaving her. He straightened his hat, turned toward the road, and fell into a jog.

Now the minister’s stomach was full of warm whiskey, and its fumes made his head light as a dirigible. He looked across the room at the bar, and saw that what had once been two old men had swelled into a small crowd of short-haired youths, filling all but a single stool. As the thin, middle-aged bartender hurried back and forth between the beer-tap and the cooler, the young men joked with a small-statured blonde girl who had newly appeared

behind the bar. The proprietor snapped a few words at her, and the girl began taking down glasses with a laugh and a toss of her head. On the television, a phalanx of men in matching uniforms was swarming to some area of the field, and excited ejaculations arose from amongst the young watchers, while the old men who had been there since before the minister's arrival sat up in their seats and rapped on the bar with their knuckles. More young people, females as well as males, were filing through the bar's dark wood door, shaking rain from their bare arms and folding their umbrellas with a battery of soggy snaps.

The minister noted this activity meditatively. He sought his watch in the pocket of his jacket, which he had laid at his side across the bench, and brought it forth with its silver chain dangling. Peering down at its open face in the paltry light, he learned by squinting and holding it out at various distances and in various directions, that the hour was almost midnight. It was half-past nine o'clock when he had left the motel room.

While the gawky proprietor and his slight assistant were obscured by the bodies that pushed toward the bar, two young men—one of them walking backward—shuffled into the room, hoisting between them a heavy box, which was protected from the rain by a yellow beach-towel. They were followed by two others, who each carried a small crate and a collapsed tripod. All of these were borne without ceremony past the minister's booth to the rear wall, at the foot of which the minister now noticed was a shallow platform, intended to be a stage.

Turning in his seat, the minister observed the larger box being set on one end; the towel was swept away to reveal a machine with a line of knobs across its face, beneath what looked like a small television screen. Making sparse conversation, the troupe unfolded the tripods and, withdrawing a pair of black speakers from the crates, set these atop them. On the side of the box there hung a round-headed microphone, attached to the machine by a long, raveled cord. The two mounted speakers were similarly engaged to the box, and one of them was positioned less than a meter from the minister's head. At the pressing of a button, the screen began to glow, until a menu of sorts could be discerned, through which one of the group began to toggle with the aid of a remote control. Another young man turned a knob and began puffing and counting into the microphone, adjusting the volume upwards and downwards, upwards and downwards, all the while saying, "One two, one two." The sound cut sharply into the minister's ear, and he wrenched his head away, putting his back to the machine and its attendants, and wrapping both his hands around his tumbler of diluted scotch. His expression, once placid, grew vexed.

With brown bottles and cocktail glasses held before them, the garrulous crowd of youths began to separate from the bar—most of them gathering in the center of the room, around the area of the minister's booth. Sounds of jollity, too general to be ascribed to any one figure, passed among the tightly-formed array. The minister saw young people winking and nudging each other in the arm,

making dares; others he saw shaking their heads shyly, or tilting them back with anxious laughter. The atmosphere grew rank with the smell of beer as froth spilled from the sides of their bottles and mugs. Small-girthed girls in tight tank-tops tipped long, pale vessels to their glossy lips, their throats bobbing as they swallowed. The minister peered at them and then turned away. The sight made him uneasy.

The young man who had been supporting the bottom end of the machine when it was carried in now hopped to the front of the stage and, taking the microphone in his hand, announced that, as host, the privilege of the first song belonged to him. The throng talked and laughed on as if nothing had been said. The young man, whose long nose and sour expression marked him out for an arrogant sort, made a gesture in the direction of his companion holding the remote control, and into the disordered clamoring of the crowd, the sound of recorded music began to empty. Closing his eyes and counting himself into the measure with four nods of his head, the self-titled host broke into a wheedling croon, pressing the microphone close to his lips. Though he caught his notes only a little flatly, his approach was over-dramatic, and at once whoops of mockery sparked up from some of the boys gathered about, and the girls made wrinkled faces at each other.

The minister, who had finished his whiskey, was now aggrieved at himself for staying so late, and embittered at the trampling of his tranquility by the youthful mob. He

set his hat on his head and dragged his jacket up by the collar, feeling about in the breast pocket for the collection-money with which to settle his bill. Rising and locating his balance, he left his seat and found himself in the center of the commotion, hardly able to tell as he struggled through whether it was he who was falling against the youths or the youths that were pushing against him. The time he spent making his way through seemed almost eternal, and every face that he glimpsed seemed to regard him with affronted dislike. He was just stepping out toward the small grove of tables that remained between him and the bar, when he was nearly toppled over at hearing his own name called above the caterwauling, and seeing that Rosalind was at his side, with her hand grasping his sleeve.

“I thought you were in the motel room,” he cried. Rosalind looked up at him with bewildered eyes and shook her head, pointing at her ear to show that the noise was too great for her to understand him. He took her by the arm and brought her to a corner table, where, more forcefully than he would have if he had not drunk three whiskeys, he compelled her to sit. “Why aren’t you back in the room?” he demanded.

The girl looked offended at having been pushed into the chair. “You said you would be back in a few minutes, but you were gone for more than two hours,” she said. “What was I supposed to do?”

“You were supposed to be sleeping,” said the minister.

“I can’t believe you left me alone for that long,” cried the girl sharply, “What could you have been thinking?”

The minister dropped into a seat and leaned across the table so he wouldn’t have to shout. His hair hung in strands across his glasses. “How did you even get in here?” he asked. “You’re too young to be in a bar.”

“I just drifted in with the rest of the people coming for the karaoke,” Rosalind shrugged. “Nobody noticed. I can pass for a freshman, I bet.”

The minister thought she looked a little proud as she said this. He shook his head dourly. “You’d better just hope that I can get you back out of here without raising anyone’s interest,” he said. “This is a damned stupid spot you’ve got me in.”

“Are you drunk?” Rosalind gasped. “Your breath smells horrendous!”

“Of course I’m drunk,” the minister barked, “Why else would I have come here? It only makes matters that much more complicated.”

The opening notes of a familiar dance tune sprang out across the floor, drawing a cheer of approbation from the crowd. A young woman with a voice resembling the clanging of an old-fashioned fire alarm began shouting lyrics, and was joined by the whole gyrating mass, who bellowed along in the same terrible fashion. Glasses and bottles were raised in unison during the insistent downbeats of a monotonous refrain.

“Well, then, let’s stay for a while,” said Rosalind. “I’ve never been to a karaoke; it’s kind of fun.”

“You can’t be serious,” said the minister.

A curious look of fascination took hold of the girl’s features. As ghastly a noise as the crowd was making, all she could think was that it sounded to her like freedom—fearless, uninhibited, and unashamed. “Why not?” she said, “We’ve been doing nothing but driving for so long, we might as well try to enjoy ourselves now that we’ve got the chance.”

“Enjoy ourselves!” cried the minister indignantly, “In this pandemonium? This madhouse of screeching, beer-sloshed juveniles? How could anyone enjoy himself here?”

“I don’t know,” said the girl, “But it looks to me as if everyone but you is having a pretty good time. Your problem is that you don’t like *anything*.”

With a jaw thick-set and a gloaming brow, the minister crossed his arms and glared at Rosalind. She had tucked her rain-soaked, ash-blond hair behind her softly pointed ears, and her pale pink shirt clung transparently to her shoulders. When she stared at him smartly, when she sat up straight and square, she did manage to banish much of her natural childishness, which slipped most into evidence when she was afraid. He glimpsed in her the tenacious defiance that must have allowed her to survive the enormous depravities inflicted upon her by her foster parents. As she was now, she might have been easily lost among the body of grinning students, and the only perceptible difference—to the minister at least—would have been her innocence, of which all of her guardians’

most execrable abuses never succeeded in depriving her. A believer, as he was, in the doctrine of Original Sin, the minister could ascribe perfect purity to no one; but there were times when he would gaze ponderingly upon an unaware Rosalind, and perceive in her the heart of a newborn, with nothing to be gained or regained by a splash from the baptismal font. He felt monstrous for looking at her now with his drunken eyes; he was furious at the girl for coming after him, to this haunt of reprobates, and forcing herself beneath his sinful, drunken gaze. He could look across the horde of jovial college girls, and to him, however dazzled by drink he was, they appeared as nothing but sensuous cattle—already given over to Bacchus and the lowering Apis bulls that mingled in their company, putting coarse arms around their accepting shoulders, and crude hands upon their obligingly inclining backs. He had seen nothing truly beautiful in ears, until he had seen Rosalind, and he had desired—even prayed—to always see her clearly. But how gorgeous she was now—how quaintly ethereal and prosaically sublime—as she turned and watched those sordid celebrants, and saw only *people enjoying themselves!* Sighing, he shook his head and waved a hand of resignation. “We’ll stay half an hour,” he said.

Answered by a happy nod from Rosalind, he opened his watch and placed it before him on the table, attempting to divert his mind from the intolerable cacophony by tracing the mesmeric revolutions of the slenderest golden

hand, imagining each tick as if it could fill his mind like the crashing of waterfalls.

The minister was shocked out of his willful absorption by the figure of the gaunt, gray-haired proprietor, who had materialized at the side of their table and set a broad-rimmed glass before Rosalind. It was filled with a pale, icy sludge, and salt crystals enshrouded its circumference. “Ladies’ Night,” said the man with an accent steeped in the Bronx, “First drink is on the house.”

“We didn’t order anything,” said the minister. Rosalind drew her hands back from the cold glass and dropped them into her lap, her eyes fixed on the minister with a look of shrill panic.

“Sure, I know,” replied the bartender, leaving his ablution in place and wiping his hands on his apron, “But I thought the little lady might appreciate one of my famed margaritas.”

“Oh, thanks,” said the minister humbly, “But I’m afraid she doesn’t drink.”

The bartender laughed, showing yellow teeth. “Not *alcohol*, obviously,” he said, “She’s only a kid. This here’s a ‘virgin’ margarita; it’s just made out of fruit-juice and stuff like that. Come on, taste it—you’ll tell me it’s a masterpiece.”

The minister looked at Rosalind in bafflement. The girl gave a hint of a shrug, pinched the tiny red straw daintily near the top, and drew a sip. “It’s very good,” she said genuinely.

“My own secret recipe,” the proprietor confided, grinning. “It’s nothing like a real margarita, of course, but my nephews and nieces think it’s the nectar of the gods. You folks come from around here?”

“No, no,” said the minister, shaking his head slowly and wondering if his writhing nerves were evident at all in his countenance. He groped through his mind for some sort of story—something somebody in a book or a movie might have made up to explain his presence in a tavern with a young teenaged girl, to whom he bore no obvious physical likeness. The best thing, he decided, was to remain as taciturn as he could—volunteering neither lie nor truth. He wished he had never left the motel; he deplored the weakness of will that had kept him from closing his eyes and his mind to the luminous vision of the bar, and the devil that had persuaded him against all wisdom and sanity that he could go there without danger—that he could get by all right with just one drink—that he deserved one drink for the trouble he had been through, and the trouble he had so far avoided.

“You’re probably bringing her through to take a tour of the college, right?” the bartender surmised. “Funny thing, how these state schools are getting so much attention now that the economy’s started to turn south. We get loads of kids coming in from the Midwest now, just trying to escape their local scene on the few bucks that their folks have been able to set aside for their educations. That’s the only reason I let them do this karaoke

thing—there’s nothing else that’ll bring any of them out here on a Thursday night. Quite a spectacle, ain’t it?”

“Yes,” concurred the minister, “I hardly know what to make of it.”

“Yeah, me neither,” said the bartender, “craziest damn phenomenon I’ve ever seen. I used to hire real bands on the weekends. Some of them were pretty awful, but none of them made a miserable racket like this, and none of them brought the business that this does, either. It makes some kind of sense, anyway: this kid brings his own equipment and his own crowd, and I don’t have to pay anybody at the end of the night. But it ain’t like it used to be—no, sir. Five, six years ago, this place would be filled up with guys still wearing their factory blues, cussing up a cloud and getting their big, greasy handprints all over everything—playing Merle Haggard all night on the jukebox. If it weren’t for that motel across the street and the college in the next town, I probably would’ve had to pack it in with the rest of ‘em when the plant shut down. God knows what ever happened to all them poor guys. What a damn shame that was.”

The minister shook his head in sympathy but could compose no response. He thought of how nice it would be to have another glass of whiskey; the elbow of conscience dug him in the ribs when he thought of ordering one while Rosalind sat before him.

“Take my advice, sweetheart,” the proprietor now said, putting his bony face near to Rosalind’s, “whatever college you decide to go to, no matter what happens, stick

with it. Don't ever expect this world to give you nothing. You've got to work like a sonofabitch for every scrap you get; you've got to yank it right out of life's stinking jaws. You can't take nothing for granted, you understand?"

Rosalind inched back in her seat, nodding fearfully.

"And these kids out here," the bartender expostulated further, waving his hand toward the carousing mass in the middle of the floor, "they don't know how easy they have it. They don't know what it is to build a life out of nothing. They expect to find piles of gold waiting for them in the streets; they don't know how hard you've got to dig for every tiny nugget. They've got no dignity, these kids. Don't end up like them, sweetheart. Life's a serious thing."

"Thanks for the drink, friend," said the minister, rising from his seat. "It's getting quite late now, and we'd better—"

The proprietor drew back, moving his hands against his apron again, as if he had been wringing blood from the air. "Sorry, pal—I didn't mean to intrude upon your evening," he said, appearing a little confused at his own frantic oration. "Your daughter, she looks like such a good girl, you know, and I worry about kids these days—I just worry—"

"I understand entirely," the minister interjected. "Here, let me take care of the tab. Shall I meet you up at the bar?"

"Yeah, I was just headed back there," said the bartender. "Take your time, though—there ain't no rush. What're you having, scotch? Sure you don't want another?"

The minister felt very much like swearing. He declined the offer with an effortful smile and a meager wave of his hand.

“Nice talking to you,” said the proprietor, then he went off, straightening chairs and picking up bottles along the way with an anxious energy, unhampered by a stiff left leg and a prominent limp that the minister had only now taken note of.

[Note: here begins the unrevised portion. –DTT]

“Please, Rozz,” the minister moaned as he sat back down, planting both elbows before him and plunging his face into his hands, “let’s get out of this zoo before anyone else comes and bothers us.”

Rosalind had turned around in her chair again and was taking abstracted sips from her false margarita, engrossed as before upon the ribald spectacle in the back of the room. From its comparatively dignified inception, it had swiftly dissolved into a lunatic affair, composed exclusively now of young men endeavoring to amuse their besotted female companions with perverse demonstrations of lyrical tomfoolery. That which she was observing and that which she was contemplating must have been very different from each other: no sober person could have looked upon such beastly dissipation without either blushing profoundly or growing wan with dyspepsia. Rosalind’s expression was that of one sitting in a cinema, transfixed upon a distant scenario, no longer quite conscious of herself. The minister considered her with fathomless fondness and terrible pity. How much she

had suffered! How far she had fled! How dangerous and uncertain her life had become! How tired she must be!

“I think I’d like to sing something,” she said suddenly.

The minister took off his glasses, laid them on the table, and rubbed the cavities of his eyes as if trying to relieve them of some lingering hallucination. “What?” he said, almost sobbing.

“Do you think they’d let me sing something?”

Rosalind asked. “It seems a shame that all those people have gone up to sing, but none of them has actually been capable of carrying a tune. It’s a dreadful waste, don’t you think?”

“Rozz, dear,” the minister said, leaving his glasses aside and fixing his eyes pleadingly upon the girl’s, “These imbeciles clearly have no place in their lives for anything remotely beautiful or noble. Anything anyone does up there will just get dragged down to the level of base ridicule. Such associations are beneath you in the first place. In the second place, you’re in too perilous a position to be putting yourself at the center of attention.”

“*Please*,” the girl implored, “It’s been so long since I’ve sung for anybody. I really don’t think it could hurt.”

“No, Rosalind, no,” sighed the minister. “Really, it’s time to go now—we must sleep.”

A look of maudlin devastation passed over Rosalind’s face. “All right,” she said, rising forlornly. “I’ll just use the lady’s room and then we can go back to motel.”

“I have to use the restroom too,” said the minister, returning his spectacles to his face and his hat to his head.

“Just don’t wander off anywhere alone if you get out before me.”

The toilets, as it occurred, were in the rearmost corner of the barroom, to the immediate right of the stage. The minister kept his hand on Rosalind’s arm as they passed through the jostling, unwary mass of bodies, their shoes sticking to dried pools of spilt beer. Nobody was singing now: the machine had been abandoned to play on without directive, its microphone left to dangle from its hitch. The host had grown dejected, and was leaning upon the booth where the minister had first sat, mournfully stirring a straw around the ice-cluttered bottom of his highball glass. Behind him a boy in a shirt bearing Greek characters was perched over a girl who had sprawled unbecomingly over one of the benches, snapping photographs with his cellular phone while lifting up the hem of her miniskirt. The minister guided Rosalind to the lady’s room, but when the door was opened, such a stench of regurgitated liquor poured forth that it sent the girl staggering in retreat. They agreed, through signs, that she would use the men’s room, and that the minister would stand guard to see that no one entered after her. A slack-jawed young man with two chins, one goateed, the other not, weaved toward the door; on being repulsed by the minister’s outstretched arm, however, he sputtered a useless syllable and bore definitely toward the lady’s room, into which he disappeared. A few moments later, Rosalind emerged, looking somewhat paler than when she had entered. She pinched her nose and waved her hand before

it, managing a little laugh. The minister pointed to the ground in front of the doorpost where he wanted Rosalind to wait for him, and gathering his breath, went inside.

As he stood over the clogged and bespattered toilet, the minister listened to the din beyond the door, pondering, in the relative isolation of the elevator shaft-sized room, the phenomenon of Karaoke. He thought of his little congregation, orphaned now and so many hundreds of miles away—how their hymns would begin feebly with the raising first of his voice (who stood nearest the forgetful and arthritic organist), and would in moments coalesce into an uneven but tuneful choir, solemn old books in hand, eyes all sliding upward and downward on the same many-dotted page. The minister would exercise his ear sometimes by finding a single voice—that of a child, perhaps, or of ancient Mr. Hoffstader’s grim baritone, or—most often—of Rosalind’s: her remarkable, honey-sweet cadences soaring high above the deplorable mutterings of her execrable step-father, and the cowardly squeaking of her black-mouthed mother, who reeked always of cigarettes. All sang together, and all sang to God, whether God cared to hear them or did not. The minister always knew that if it were not for the hymns, many of his congregation would have never gone to church; for the hymns are the wine that keeps the creeping mind pacific. The prayers are oppressive, the vows are impossible, the readings inscrutable, the sermon severe, the communion tedious and unsatisfactory—but before and after and throughout it

all are the hymns, and for these the heart waits; by these the heart is put to its weekly rest, ready to snore through the body's abominations and the brain's outrageous heresies. Ready to forgive the stumbling of the organist and the discordance of the flock, all are happy to sing—all gathered like children to recite for their Father—knowing that He must attend and listen, that He must smile (though faintly), that He must applaud (though without fervor.)

What, thought the minister, was this Karaoke? In every way like the singing of hymns—the lyrics projected for the aid of the memory, the music a delectable invitation, the congregation gathered and warmed for their purpose—all things ready and simple and fine. Everything was present but the *Meaning*—the glorious and omnipotent Other whose presence it is that makes a church a sanctuary—a refuge from the grossness of the self, from the grossness of being. Without the protection of faith, without the confraternity of hearts, struggling upward through the blankness and the sorrow, there could be nothing but naked self-debasement, the agony of exposure before the savage grins of godless apes. Pretending to be a pop-star, the hopeful singer is maimed by the thorns of her own envy, gashed by futility, crucified by careless merriment. What is Karaoke but the shunted offspring of hopelessness and vanity—the howling of the ego in the vacuum of man's inescapable aimlessness—his indescribable boredom with himself? The minister raged to think of this: that anything could be so wasteful and so

diabolically unaesthetic! Going to the sink, he turned on cold water and put his hands in, bringing his palms up to his face, where three days' growth of beard pricked and stung like brambles.

Externally, the wordless recording that had been idly droning on was halted, and it sounded as if half the crowd had either abandoned the bar or been inexplicably silenced. Were they all going home? The minister sought about for a towel to dry his hands. A moment later, another song was beginning, and a voice fell out from the speakers, which he knew to be Rosalind's. She was singing "Someone to Watch Over Me."

Quitting the bathroom, the minister found the barroom subdued. The floor was almost clear—nearly all of the revelers had merged into the booths, where they sat in motionless rapture, their faces full of reverence and—he thought—remorse. Through the agent of the microphone, Rosalind sounded different than the minister had ever heard her; her voice was calm and low, lapping like a rosy tide over the paralyzed senses of her suddenly sanctified auditors.

REVERIE IN WHITE

A Tale

When I was a boy of about fourteen years, nearly past the torments of puberty, but still naïve and aching for love of a different kind, I had a dream that remains with me

today—though the details of it are imprecise. It now recurs to me as a vision of sorts—as something shown to me on a television screen that has flickered awake in the night of its own accord.

What I can tell you of it now is, therefore, necessarily (and perhaps mercifully) scanty. No doubt you will think it not worth the trouble of remarking upon; but your indulgence, I think, will not be unrewarded.

I wandered, in this vision, over a broad and featureless tundra of perfect white. Trees there were none, but there were, in all directions, gently rising dunes of snow, from the tops of which were cast steady plumes of agitated frost, which swirled and mingled before joining the directionless welter of ever-moving white. The wind upon which all of this was carried penetrated me palpably, like the uncut fingernails of a grasping infant upon my face, and there was something namelessly intimate and loving about the undying sting, which of itself brought forth tears from my half snow-blinded eyes. I could only just discern, a great ways in the distance, the gray presence of a mountain ridge; and having nothing better to aim my bent and staggering progress toward, I was going to these. As I went, I clambered up the dunes and stumbled down the valleys, and the mountain peaks arose and vanished in the ceaseless eddies like the ghostly horses on a ghostly carousel. But for all of this blowing and sighing and drifting, the stillness was something useless to describe, and my feet were like bundles of thumbtacks.

Before me, upon the blank face of a minor dune, I was astonished to make out what I knew to be a mirage (for I was alone, always alone, dreaming and waking)—a kind of flailing white figure lying pronounced against the snow, with arms and legs the same as mine, rising and falling, opening and closing—a gleeful, beckoning sort of gesture that left around it a dovelike pattern of arcs. Its rhythms transfixed me, and I hastened that way, perceiving as I neared that the figure had sprung up, and was now turned away to admire its swooping, sidereal creation.

I may have called out at my approach—of this I am not sure—but, when I had come within a few footfalls of it, it turned its body halfway, and its face full toward me, and was instantly seen to be a girl—a girl like an—

But I must pause here. My memory, never the most exact about true things, goes tremulously to the task of recalling a dream, a vision, which arose and departed in a few seconds' time, all these twenty years ago. I am shivering involuntarily as I attempt to describe her. She is the faintest, most graceful of imprints which the clumsy substance of words cannot try to fill without marring and misshaping to pity.

Her face, I should say, was whiter than marble—but soft, wondrously soft—I needed not touch it to tell—with two soft blushes, and two soft blue eyes—framed all around with a soft and luxuriant aureole of the whitest fur. Though I could not divide my gaze from hers, I had marked, while on my advance toward her, that she wore a billowing white parka—a not uncommon coat—and white,

fur-trimmed boots (again, of unassuming style), and that her hands were mitten-clad, and that her legs—it seemed impossible—were bare: bare as far up as I could follow them. And now, as she turned herself a little more toward me, I could perceive (remember, I beg, that I was lonely and young) that her coat was not fastened by anything, but held on solely by the languid—indeed, quite careless—clenching of her big-sleeved arms around herself, and that it fell a little off of one shoulder, and the shoulder, too, was bare. She had, I cannot omit but to recall, the littlest and straightest and finest little clavicle; Donatello could not have carved it. And against this unearthly clavicle, there was flung, from the cavernous recesses of her great hood, a trace lock of argent blonde hair, which curled at the tip and hugged, as it were, the clavicle divine.

She smiled. (I am tortured to write it.) She lifted her arm and gestured whimsically at the snow-angel she had made. With a cock of her head and a wave of her mitten, she invited me (don't ask me, please, how I knew—it was a dream, remember, a dream...) to lay myself down in its celestial shape. Baffled but obedient, I did as she required, dreading that my frame would overwhelm its perfect proportions. But when I was on my back against the sloping dune-face, I watched her, as she seemed to lay down beside me, an arm's-length away, so that her tiny mittened fingers were just nearly touching mine; and I thought (as one can think within a dream), *Oh God—we are to make snow-angels, and she will be all exposed—all*

exposed in her winging to the knives of the wind! But when she drew up her arm, my arm followed, and our boot-toes touched as we hemmed out our angel-robcs, and we flailed together with purpose there, ever more swiftly, until I began to feel warm and then hot and then stifling beneath my cumbersome winter-things. And when at last—at long, long, last—I was too suffocated and weary to continue, I lifted my head towards her. But there was no girl there: only a snow-angel, and I was awake and still—always—alone.

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Romantic of turn, I married young, seven years after the wonderful dream, and in the month of January. For our honeymoon roost, my wife and I selected a picturesque log cabin, high up in the piney and white-dusted slopes of the Catskill Mountains, where one steep and snaking road after another left civilization almost beyond the reach of memory. A honeymoon it could not truly be called, for my bride—some years older than me, and ambitious—could not long be taken from her work, which was in the city. After a week of building fires in the woodstove, and cooking meals of rice, and lentils, and canned black beans, and of holding each other and shivering under motley mounds of blankets in the loft, she took her car (the only car we had) and descended again to the town, and thence to the city. I watched it—the little glittering thing against the long dirt road—until the

mountain's curve swept it out of view, and then I turned back inside, a blanket around my shoulders, and sat before the bright morning stove.

She had promised to return after three days and nights, but on the second day, a blizzard arose, which, I was informed, would prevent her from retaking the mountain roads before substantial clearing of snow, ice, and fallen trees had been done. The wind on the night of the storm was like nothing I had ever witnessed. Every tree within my view (which, despite the raging sheet of militant snow) was bent almost half-over, so that it seemed the whole mountainside would be dragged up by its roots and hurled down into the icy Esopus cascades. I had brought in all the firewood remaining to us when the snow began to fall, and with the icicle-tipped arrows of wind laughingly defying the chinks and cracks of the little-used cabin, I burned more of it than was advisable in my anxiousness to find some warmth and solace in the absence of my wife. That night I cooked the last can of beans; for my wife had planned to bring more food with her on her scheduled—now impossible—re-ascent.

The roads leading up to the cabin were cleared by the third day after the squall, but my wife had been given an additional project, which she told me would occupy her until the weekend. Not wishing her to think me the complaining type, nor to distract her from what she assured me was a most important piece of business, I said nothing of the fact that there was now no more rice in the pantry, and hence, no more food. It was ten miles down

the mountain to the village with its modest general store, and I resolved, in the morning, to walk.

An hour after dawn, without relighting the stove (for my wood, too, was now exhausted), I put a pack on my back and pitted myself against the uncongenial midwinter wind. Ice was still plentiful, and overspread by a new half-inch of brittle snow, which greatly hindered my pace down the mountain. More than once I looked up, despairing, at the ridge on which the cabin sat, and pondered with grief the ascent that would have to follow my descending. In six hours I had found myself again among residences, and by early afternoon I was in the general store, buying a pound of rice and as many cans of beans as I could afford—thinking little, however, of what I would be able to carry. For my immediate hunger, I bought some jerky (though my wife disapproved of my eating meat); but this I had to return when the tab ran too high. And so I resumed my journey upward in the same state of painful inanition which had inspired my way down.

The sun had set before I was more than half finished with my trek, which, ice considered, was even slower than the first. My pack, heavy-laden with the densest of provisions, seemed to grow ever heavier upon my shoulders—always endeavoring, it seemed, to tip me feet-over-head back down into the valley. I had only one thing to be grateful for, and that was the moonlight, which was cast in providential profusion across the road and the still-leaning pines, turning the high snowbanks

roundabout me into battlements of crystal-flecked silver. It seemed, as I trudged and tripped and clawed my way upward, that there was nothing pleasant waiting for me at the cabin—no warmth, no wife, nothing to make my hard way worthwhile. I had even forgotten my hunger, so thoroughly frozen and bone-weary was I.

Against a towering snowbank, I reeled and lay down my pack, stretching my arms out to their length, and splaying my legs in rigid exhaustion, followed my breath as it fled towards the moon and threaded through its nimbus. Unconsciously, my eyes sank closed, and I began—gently, at first, and then, for warmth, more rapidly—to bring my limbs up and down, in and out, digging myself an angel-shaped alcove there in the dirty, silver-strewn mound.

And that's when I felt it. A kiss, colder than the heavens—and on my cheek, the faintest brush of fur.

-Spring, 2014

ORANGE BEAR AND WEEVIL

A Sketch

The boy held his little orange bear so tightly that it lay flattened against his chest—the bear having always tended somewhat toward flaccidity. It caused the bear's expressionless head to point up toward the boy's face, so that its two perfectly black and circular eyes seemed to

stare directly into those of the person to whom it owed the present unpleasantness. The bear suffered its incommodious lot without a word (having been created without a mouth), while the boy looked seriously down into the two pinpoints of light reflected in its eyes, whispering to it of his diabolical ambitions.

“I don’t understand it,” the boy was saying to the bear, “Everyone appears to assume that I’m such a tender and good-natured boy, while somehow failing to perceive the fuming depths of infernal malice that rage behind my earnest brown eyes, perpetually cursing the world to damnation and hellfire. What’s left for me to do?”

The bear flattened out a bit more and pondered the world beyond the boy’s shoulder, then sighed in unison with the boy and once again returned gaze for gaze.

“Yes,” said the boy, “I suppose you’re right, however hesitant we both may feel about the matter. Nothing to do but to sell my soul to Satan—lock, stock, and barrel. I do hate everything so! And yet, to be beyond redemption, beyond salvation, beyond hope... It seems rather dreadfully *permanent*. Like death, but so much longer. Does it not?”

They sighed together again. The bear rolled its eyes and shrugged.

“Ah, Orange Bear,” said the boy, “You have every right to be exasperated with me. I’ve spoken of it and spoken of

it, but have yet to move a finger. All right then, I'll do it! I'll say the magic words and make the Devil appear, then I'll sell him my soul and become all-powerful and infinitely wicked. Shall I say them right now, Orange Bear?"

Orange Bear held its breath. Its eyes glistened with dark anticipation.

Sitting upright in his bed and putting the bear in his lap, the boy clearly and solemnly pronounced the words he had learned from a library book. After ten or fifteen seconds, one of his buttocks began to tingle and his throat felt a little dry, but nothing else had happened. The bear suggested, in his taciturn way, that the boy try pronouncing the silent syllable at the end of the phrase.

"Bagabi lacha babi!" the boy said again, then, with greater emphasis than before, "Lamach kahi achaba-*BEY!*"

In an instant, the Devil appeared. He took the form of an insurance salesman in a navy blue suit and a brown hat, with a pair of horn-rimmed glasses and a faux-leather attaché case. Smiling wearily, he placed his case precisely on top of the orange bear, opened its clasps, and began fingering through an accordion file stuffed with papers that were in various stages of disintegration.

"Warner, Weber, ah—Weevil," he said, drawing forth a comparatively fresh-looking sheet.

“Weevil?” inquired the boy, working the bear out from under the briefcase and stroking it apologetically between the ears.

“Henceforth, pursuant upon your signing” said the insurance salesman, “Your name is to be Weevil. Have you an objection?”

“Are you the Devil?” asked the boy.

“My card,” said the insurance salesman, drawing a business card out of his breast pocket. It was very sparse and stylish—gold printed on black stock—and all it said was, “THE DEVIL, 666 Villa di Inferno, Rome.”

The boy looked at the front and the back of the card.

“May I keep this?” he asked.

The Devil waved his assent, his small eyes jauntily perusing the language of the document he held. Dropping the card into the front pocket of his silk pajama shirt, the boy put his hand out for the Devil’s contract. The Devil passed it to him with a sort of smirking air.

“I can’t read this,” said the boy, “The letters are too small.”

“It’s nothing but fine print,” bragged the Devil. He produced a magnifying glass from a pocket in his attaché case and gave it to the boy, who recommenced his study of the paper.

“It just says the same thing over and over again,” observed the boy, showing about as much surprise as he

has heretofore been capable of showing, “Weevil, Weevil, Weevil, Weevil, Weevil...”

“Et cetera,” said the Devil, “You’re consenting to the name and all that comes with it. Will you sign?”

“But what do I get?” demanded the boy.

“Anything you want,” replied the Devil, taking a pen out and prodding it toward the boy, “Sign, please.”

The boy took the pen. “I want to be all-powerful and infinitely wicked,” he said.

“Most of us do,” said the Devil, “Sign the paper.”

Putting the pen to the paper, which began to singe and sizzle at the ballpoint’s contact, the boy halted his hand.

“What’s this second line for?” he inquired.

“A cosigner,” said the Devil, “Of course you’ll need a cosigner.”

“What for?” asked the boy.

“In case,” said the Devil.

“In case of what?” urged the boy.

“Have you any idea what the hour is in Rome?” the Devil barked. “Sign the paper. Snap, snap!”

“I haven’t any cosigner,” whined the boy.

The devil reached down and snatched Orange Bear out of the crook of the boy’s arm, where it had been puzzling over the contract with its unmoving black eyes.

“Here,” the Devil said, shaking the bear in front of the boy, “Here’s your cosigner.”

“Orange Bear?” said the boy, impulsively reaching to retrieve his purloined companion. “But he isn’t evil. He’s just a bear.”

“He’ll do all right,” said the Devil, “Sign the damned paper.”

The boy took a long and loud breath, then punctiliously blazed his name across the first line, coughing a little when the smoke reached his nose.

“Now the bear,” said the Devil.

“Orange Bear has no fingers,” said the boy, “I’ll have to cosign my signature for him.”

“Just *pretend* he’s signing,” said the Devil, “Press the pen in his little paw and move his arm as you’re writing.”

The boy did what he said, searing “Orange Bear” onto the face of the parchment.

“Nice to have your business, Weevil,” said the Devil, extending his hand.

“Thank you,” said the boy, shaking it meekly. His own hand was quite small in comparison. The Devil offered his hand to the bear also, but the offer was snubbed. He snorted, closed his briefcase, and sank down into the floorboards as if he were riding an elevator.

“Tell me,” said the orange bear once the top of the Devil’s hat had vanished into the carpet, “Was it really worth being called *Weevil*?”

2 May 2012

PART TWO: REFLECTIONS

AUTHOR’S PREFACE

If it was not always true that every poet only becomes a poet in response to an ecstatic, conversion-like stirring of Love, at least by the time Dante composed the book on which my own is modeled, it had become true, and almost certainly remains true today. Inasmuch as a poet must grope deeply inward for the verisimilitudes that must be caught, and clutched, and wrestled to the page, so also must the first inklings of a poem rise up to meet the poet’s probing hand, and surrender themselves to that savagery by which feelings are bludgeoned and cloven into words. Whatever rank poetry holds in society today—and it is certainly immeasurably diminished from that which it held in Dante’s—we are nevertheless sensible of its owing its dim perseverance to the same embattled but inextinguishable forces that keep religion relevant in an

age of science, or music in an age of mechanized clatter, or romance in an age of compulsive copulation. To the poet we still pay the truculent regard of the priest who officiates at our weddings and funerals: we don't know why we need him, but his absence would be more onerous to us somehow than his presence is. There are good priests and bad priests, of course, but it means something to us that there is someone willing to attempt the job, however *un-job-like* we secretly or overtly pronounce it to be.

Dante, in composing *La Vita Nuova*, believed himself in all earnestness to be the priest and the vassal of Love, who presented as his icon, his object of contemplation, the inestimable lady Beatrice. Unhappy as it is to relate, we are not all shown so straight a course (however grief-bestrewn), nor is the priestly-poetic vocation always so immediately fertile as was Dante's, whose career began with a numinous vision of Love incarnate, and who wanted no previous authority other than that of having "in some sort the art of discoursing with rhyme." I myself have had no such visions, and my ability as a lyric poet has ever been questionable and scantily observed. What I possess in lieu of Dante's privileged intimacy with the Genius of Courtly Love is a lifelong acquaintance with some rootless and unfathomable Sorrow, which, while occasionally very violent, generally resolves itself into a mere unshakable melancholy, and, since my earliest years, imbues me with an unaccountable passion for Death. By this I do not mean a vulgar and prurient interest in dead *things* or bellicose

scenes of human carnage—for these are as repugnant to me as to any pacifist and coward—but an overpowering and all-saturating craving to *know Death* by being, in one or another degree, dead. It is something like the “soul-sickness” described by William James, which is so commonly found among ascetics, and I have no reason to doubt that—the uninspiring conditions of my age being duly brought to bear—it is not closely akin to that sweet malady under which the author of the *Inferno* labored. It is, at least, a darkling and bilious-natured cousin to the same. In the place of Love, then, I have the sublime figure and prospect of Death, and in the place of Beatrice (i.e., “she who bestows blessings”) I have an indifferent collection of lesser muses, reduced by the merciless *Zeitgeist* into wives, paramours, and acolytes-turned-apostates. But that is what time does: it reduces, it subverts, it makes corrupt. Think of this book not so much as containing my poetry, then, but my *corruptions* of poetry, for the inspiration of which I had only to Corruption to turn.

My education, such as it was, had little place for poetry; I was an adult before the finer points of composition began to present themselves to me, and I became persuaded of (or converted to) the superiority of traditional forms. In earlier years, I wrote motley, unrefined verses in what I considered to be the modern mode, the greater number of which became the lyrics of the songs that I was, from my youth until almost my thirtieth year, in the incessant habit

of penning and putting to record. It was not until the musical impulse began by increments to forsake me that the making of verse for its own sake became, by virtue of the storms of grief that continued to rampage against my tranquility, my only immediate avenue of expression. This is not to say that I regarded myself as a poet, or that I ever sought to be regarded as such by those few who were witness to my productions; only that the things which my hand brought forth, animated as it was by the intoxications of liquor and the vainglorious impulse toward posterity familiar to all of Death's ugly orphans, would be recognized by the lettered as something striving toward a poetical aim, though it be long out of reach and only murkily in view.

The New Death demands to be expressed in old ways. There are many reasons why this ought to be so, but the first is that Death, while being the oldest thing there is, is nevertheless new to everyone who comes to it, and everyone to which it comes, expectedly or unexpectedly. Life erupts upon us before we are conscious of it. Of breathing we are rarely conscious, but of the knowledge that our breathing will someday cease, we cannot help but be *acutely* conscious, however assiduously we endeavor to put it from our minds. The New Death, therefore, is the Death that insists upon its oldness—the Death that we must make our friend and familiar, and which permits us to be surprised by our breathing. It is for this reason that all poetry is innately sepulchral in nature and function.

The poet first apprehends his emotions and strangles them into stillness, then entombs them in a crypt or mausoleum of deliberate verse, where they molder in relic form rather than rotting in the open air. The poet is the tyrant who makes martyrs of his thoughts, hoping, as he does, that they will be found saintly—and, in literal truth, be canonized.

-Damien Tavis Toman

Highland, New York

June 14, 2013

PROLOGUE - A WORSHIPER OF THE IMAGE

She arrived, at last, two weeks after I had sent for her, during which interval I had prepared feverishly for her coming. The gifts I had bought for her were not extravagant—artificial flowers, little chocolates, imitation perfume, candles of all colors—but she knew, I was sure, that the parsimony of my means disclosed, in this way, an embarrassment of devotion, a degree of undisguised adoration of which rich men cannot be capable. From dusty Mexico City to the verdant hills of Upstate New

York—it was awful to think of the hands she had passed through. Hardly knowing what she made of my language, I declared her beautiful in breathless tones and I took her in my arms for the first time—the lightness of her no less astonishing than her undreamt-of corporeality. She grinned ceaselessly up at me, and her grin was broad and flawless, and of such fierce and luminous tranquility as no flesh-bearing face could portray. Kissing her mouth seemed not just irreverent, but impracticable—for what was there to kiss? My new career of kissing began instead with my lips pressed to her tiny marmoreal brow. Dabbing her tenderly with the wetted tip of a clean rag, I called her by the names I had learned: *La Flaca*, *La Bonita*, *La Huesuda*, *La Niña Blanca*, and carrying her to the place I had prepared myself, I set her scythe in the loop of her right hand, and her golden scales in the loop of her left, and I lit her candles, and knelt rapturously there for several silent minutes before pouring a glass of tequila.

The tequila, despite being the liquor prescribed as the Saint's particular preference, would not last. Its effects on me were too different from those of whiskey, which was *my* drink, and the libation to which I would in the coming weeks revert—both in the course of my own habits, and in the attendance of my newly adopted devotions as a self-confirmed Santa Muertisto. Unlike whiskey, tequila

had a fiery effervescence that went directly to the top of my head, making it feel like a breeze-cast balloon filled with helium and tropical spices. More appropriate to my troglodytic character, whiskey worked in the opposite direction, seeping down into my chest cavity and reviving that little black furnace in my bowels by which all my heavy, creaking mechanisms received their animation. It was the first of many little exceptions, modifications, and reductions that I would begin making to the established and recommended rituals surrounding the veneration of Santa Muerte, almost as soon as her altar had been completed with the arrival of the image—that is, the statue—itself. Love, however true and transcendent it may be, can transform a man only so much. Witness Constantine, or Augustine, even Paul himself. Mine was the revelatory love of an instant convert, a man to whom salvation seemed already overdue and therefore inevitably imperfect; but also a man who was near to attaining his thirtieth year, and for whom, therefore, both love and conversion could only have been made possible by an awkward operation of the will. Unlike the typical convert to the cult of the skinless Lady, I had received no miracles, and expected none from my devotions; at least I told myself as much. Standing before the flimsy, black-walled hovel I had constructed to house the image, I felt more than anything that I had found the way to claim Death

formally, just as I had always known myself to have been claimed by her: that I could now keep Death fixed in my vision, however long she withheld her hand from me. *You maddening coquette!* I could not restrain myself from thinking to the statue, *You may deny me, you may evade me, but I will not let you forget me.*

Conversion is never anything more or less than abrupt and joyful recognition of the already-known, like coming to oneself in the middle of the supermarket and realizing without the aid of any traceable connective principle that you had come there for evaporated milk—but that, on top of this, your wife adores sherbet, and you adore your wife. It is, I mean to say, never alien, but always a blunt but blinding annunciation of the stupendously familiar. That's why conversion is easy, though the remembrance of it is not. It has all the markings of a culmination, while nevertheless pointing abysmally out into the future, delivering a white flash of unexpected and deceptively redemptive reality while expecting a lifetime of labors in the name of that which is always inevitably assumed without being consciously self-chosen. That flash of reality which one receives is one's own and no one else's: the world may concur with one on every quirk and quibble, and yet the world's belief is mere shuffling rote and vacant

salutation, while one's own is *truth*, incredible in its obviousness.

So it was when, picking through Wikipedia pages in search of something else on one of the last nights of August, 2011, I first learned of the existence of the Santa Muerte phenomenon in Mexico, and knew in an instant that the religion I had sought since the day my faith was lost had, in this mundane way, found me. Or rather, that I had discovered without seeking that which I had forgotten I was always looking for. The dawn had not come before I had purchased Online a statue around which I could enact my intended devotions—a white robed skeleton standing upon a blue and green globe, with an implement for reaping in one hand and one for weighing in the other.

Let it not be believed, however, that I was without reservations. Beside that which fascinated me about the cult of Holy Death, there was much that, even in the first days of my eager researches, seemed to my Protestant instincts excessive, impertinent, and profane. From the beginning, my impulsive dedication to the Bony Lady was defined by that variety of inescapable paradox for which all true religion must allow, and without which Reason could never be supplanted by Faith. I understood immediately that I could not come to Santa Muerte as a

Mexican living in the barrios of Tijuana could. I possessed neither the Catholic sensibility for the veneration of saints and blessed objects, nor the continuous propinquity to death enjoyed by those whose world is dominated by drug-lords and kidnappers, and whose yearly rituals include the graveyard celebrations of *el Dio de Los Muertes*. Nothing could have been more antithetical to the charismatic but unadorned evangelical Christianity of my youth than the combination of pseudo-magical idolatry and indigenous supernaturalism of Santa Muerte and its popish antecedents. As a much younger man, I doubtless would have found these exotic trappings all the more scintillating and attractive; at twenty-nine they seemed only the unavoidable formalities attached to a tradition whose essence resonated with my deepest being, but whose practical peculiarities lay still beyond my capacities to rationally incorporate. If I loved these things at first, it was because they were my Lady's, and I loved them for love of her. What most amazed me at the moment of my conversion was the simplicity with which I accepted Death—heretofore either masculine or sexless—to be a woman. After this moment, it seemed impossible that I could have ever thought of her otherwise.

It may be contested here that it ought to have hardly mattered to me whether Death were to wear the face, as it

were, of either a woman or a man, for in either case, Death is Death, and there is nothing so terrible nor so unnatural as an object of veneration than that. Having made some indication of the features of my religious upbringing and geographical situation that made me an uncommon candidate for the cult of Santa Muerte, then, it may be best to acquaint you with those features of my interior self which rendered any belief system in which Death was not the principle authority and sole aspiration—that is, any religion in which life is accounted as preferable and superior to death—unsatisfactory and repellant to me. With this consideration in mind, I will dwell but briefly upon the disposition of my youth, before returning to the autumn of 2011, whence the present discourse has its proper beginning.

CHAPTER ONE - HOW THE HAND OF DEATH SOUGHT ME IN YOUTH

It must be confessed, before pursuing my object further, that I am one of those (possibly fortunate) creatures for whom childhood was in major part an irrecoverable blank. This is to say that little of it is knowable to me from memory, and that the little part which is remembered is not remembered well, but only in the form of

disconnected and untraceable fragments, more composed of sensory impressions than inhabitable and relatable “memories” as such. Any chronological coherency that my earliest past can be said to maintain, therefore, has been assembled for me from hearsay, and must be trusted to somehow accommodate in its twists and folds those crude inklings of personal recollection of which my in-turning mind can untrusting lay hold. Of the exterior circumstances of my childhood, therefore, let it suffice to say that poverty, uncertainty, and unvaried misery were its constituent elements, and that terror in some form or another was never absent from the foremost workings of my consciousness. There was almost nothing that I did not fear, for there was nothing in life that was not frightful. Hunger, homelessness, humiliation, the inescapable wrath of my parents and the inexplicable hatred of my peers, these were the quotidian realities of a childhood that now courteously conceals itself even from my nightmares. From the moment of my first self-awareness, I was conscious of nothing so much as the unendurable toilsomeness of living, and the awful, desperation-inducing presentiment of anguish accorded by the most modest consideration of futurity. My freshest and most incipient thoughts, therefore, were of abhorring life and, it must rightly be supposed, loving and hoping for what is foolishly but understandably misrepresented as its

antipode, death. Thus, my first stirring of adoration for Death arose in dumb response to my otherwise unanswerable loathing for life—my own life, the animating principle abiding in my own flesh, as much as that which might be called the life around me—the appearances and activities of the world to which my person was causelessly condemned.

I was, almost from infancy, tragically sensible of having been cheated of death. Delivered of my mother immediately upon the heels of my twin and only brother, Elliot, I was (as has since been related to me) less than a pound in weight, and scarcely of sufficient size to fill the palm of my father's hand. My brother, having flourished at my expense in the womb, was healthy and admirable in every respect; I was of such a quality as nature, left to herself, would have not suffered to survive for an hour in the open air. The edict of nature was not so honored, however, and I was instantly removed to the custody of various insensible machines—respirators, incubators, feeders and hydrators—whereby life, unbidden and unwelcome, was foisted upon a loathsome and nature-detested frame. My fury at learning this some few years later was unquenchable and all-obsessing. Whole nights were spent weeping silently in my bed for Death to forgive me my unwitting elusion and reclaim me again

unto herself, while I could discern, just beyond the darkened window, the mournful murmurings of that dead family to whom I, as a babe born to death, must duly have belonged.

My parents, undiscouraged veterans of the original Jesus Movement, believed with an ardency fringing on fanaticism in the imminence of Christ's Second Coming, and the literality of the tribulations foretold in the *Apocalypse* of John. In church and before the proverbial hearth (such as a mobile home or rural slum could afford) we heard these horrors ceaselessly elaborated—opportunities for persecution and martyrdom surpassing those enjoyed by the Christians of Nero's day—lest, in the midst of God's unwarrantable procrastination, we found our capacities for anticipation exhausted. The terror, for me, was palpable but superfluous. Though I took rare consolation in the hope that the world would soon cease to be, it seemed cruel that the day of destruction should be preceded by torments and privations in excess of those with which I was already intimately familiar. It was not *this* future that terrified me in particular, but *any* future—anything other than instant and permanent oblivion. Especially horrible to me was the doctrine of the Rapture—of being lifted from earth directly into Heaven, thereby foregoing death and entering

without pause into a glaring and tedious immortality. Friendless in the world, I loved Jesus as I was commanded to do, but I resented Him his resurrection, and for this I felt irremediably foredoomed. I would have been infinitely more impressed by Him had He managed to remain dead.

As I grew, I felt ever more pointedly the truth of the Platonic maxim that “the body is the prison of the soul.” In the unbroken solitudes of my later boyhood, I took ever-increasingly rhapsodic delight in acts of self-mutilation, slashing my arms, breast, and face with the delirious exuberance of the chief mourner at a pagan funeral. The innumerable scars layered upon scars deriving from these nightly orgies of bloodletting are still with me, and can be descried from a distance. All of this I excused as a prelude to the consummation whose time I wished neither to hasten nor to forestall, while—strange though it sounds even now—Death still had use for me, though the living had none. When or how this improbable consolation first occurred to me, I never could discover, though it seems to me that from a point deeply hidden by the shadows of childhood, my sense that Death was urging and beckoning me toward her was gradually annexed by a concurrent sense that Death desired me, for the moment, to pose among the living: that living *for* Death was to be my atonement for the aberration of my birth. Thus it was

only by the assurance that I was already dead—that I was “death infecting life”—that existence among the living became, if not bearable, then at least defensible. It also found utility in explaining why nobody ever seemed to want me around. Society’s otherwise unaccountable rejection of me was, literally and functionally, the revulsion shown by a living organism toward the introduction of a dead one—the instinctual nausea felt in the presence of a corpse. Only the corpse cannot typically express that the disinclination is mutual.

When I was seventeen years old I acquired the attachment of a girl who, abiding with me for some while, by a predictable course became pregnant. We married clandestinely when she was eight months progressed, and on the fifth morning of April 2001 she was delivered of a daughter, to whom we gave the name Haley. The catastrophe that this event represented to my being all but confounds expression. It was as if I had brought down a wall of perfidious and ineradicable shame betwixt myself and the Death that had been my only solace, spurning her for the brutish indulgence of a life which would now and forever be dependent upon my own. For a long period after the birth of the child, I was seized by the terrifying impression that Death had become unrecognizable to me—that the only thing of which I could be certain was

now mystifying and unfathomable, and that I was estranged from it, perhaps, more than was any living thing. I *feared* death, and the fear of it consumed me, even as much as the fear of life, from which my paternal responsibilities had to no degree secured me an abatement. I looked out at death in stammering, dull-witted wonderment, and it seemed to me a thing of inexcusable senselessness and indifference. With my daughter in my arms, I thought (and I caught myself thinking it), *why must she die? What is death, that it must take what I have made?* And later, as the bewilderment eased and I began coming again to my former reason, I looked at the child and thought, *what is this that has caused my death to abandon me?* For suicide, which had been the last and only privilege assured to me by life, was now the pleasure forbidden above all. Condemning my daughter to life, I had also condemned myself.

In search of consolation, or redemption, or catharsis, I turned my energies to the writing of songs—lamentations for the living and elegies to the memory of death—which were to become the first recordings of a musical career considerable for its variety and industry but unmatched in its obscurity. It was in May of 2002, after I had been turned out of my apartment by my soon-to-be-ex-wife,

that gloomy rumination upon my prospects as a singer prompted me to record the following reflections:

“The universe has no good plans for me. It finds me sour and seeks to rid itself of my disagreeable presence. No matter how many may hold me in high esteem, I will be subject to that sole defining truth, and will stare with mournful resignation into the unrelenting tempests of disaster that will never cease to encroach upon my horizon. My life will be distinguished by tragedy, poverty, ruin and misery; my death will be grisly, ironic and humiliating. If I am ever remembered at all, it will be in the punch lines of low-minded jokes exchanged between drunken proletariats, peering out above losing hands of cards, eyes stinging with the smoke of cigarettes, and dulled by an inherited indifference to the beautiful and profound. To my daughter, I will be a source of shame and embarrassment. She will deny me day after day. I will be merely an incidental party in a birth she didn't choose and a past she declines to recall. My ‘day in the sun’ will come when the dawn gleams merrily upon my tombstone, casting deep shadows in the ruts of my name, too distant to see the folly it exposes, too great to pause and pity the ordeals of we who dance and struggle in the amphitheater of time, and are slaughtered without compunction by our celebrated Caesar, the eternal tyrant, Death. Every knee

shall bow and every tongue confess the supremacy of Hades and the victory of Death. Amen.”

This, then, was my state of mind and my state of affairs near the end of my nineteenth year: dejected, loveless, without cause or inclination to hope for anything more than a timely close to my already wearisome life. My eyes, it is true, were fixed unswervingly on Death, but with a gaze more of dutiful reverence than ecstatic adoration. In the coming years my role upon the mortal stage would grow in some measure more elaborate, though my youthful prognostication of perpetual failure would by no means be disproved. I would marry again and again be divorced, I would record prolifically for no specifiable audience, I would purchase a vainglorious university education, I would make myself infamous on a negligible scale—but I would never relinquish my innate devotion to Death, nor cease preferring the society of sepulchers to the company of men. Never did it seem to me that life held any appreciable reality in the presence of death; and Death being the only constant thing, it was in my love of Death alone that I could show any constancy. I failed at last in everything but this.

CHAPTER TWO - GOODNIGHT, IRENE

In the final days of August 2011, a hurricane of such strength as I had never seen bent its aimless vengeance upon the easternmost states of the Union, doing a good deal of mischief, and—by contemporary accounts since shown to be exaggerations—effectively erasing the hamlet of Phoenicia, New York, in the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. It was enough that I believed Phoenicia was gone, and that the greater portion of my grief was caused by my not knowing whether I would rather wail or rejoice. There was no place on earth that had shown me less kindness, and no place on earth that I loved so much, as little Phoenicia, with its single, short thoroughfare and its lopsided diadem of low, purple peaks.

My romance with Phoenicia—my many romances with Phoenicia—were concluded years before that period with which the present narrative is concerned. It benefits us only to know that all of my cruelest and most magnificent memories were interred in those piney hillsides, to arise again like the dint of an old wound whenever the thunder rolled out from the west. Believing the reports that it had vanished was, for the moment, a sensation akin to groping for a doorknob in the night—or

rather, the desperate confusion that comes when no doorknob is found. Though I had spent there only two winters, and those five years apart, Phoenicia was the only place in the world in which the feeling of being lost and alone was indistinguishable from that of being home and at rest. It was the place where I had been reborn, and I had sworn that it would be the place of my death. What can be worse for the weary than having no fit place to die?

At the hour when the hurricane arrived, I was occupied as the night auditor at the Hudson Valley Resort in Kerhonkson, New York, in which town I also resided, as I had done since shortly after my second divorce in 2008. I had come to Kerhonkson in the autumn of that year, so that my daughter, who had been delivered into my custody during my second marriage, could share proximity with her mother, then an occupant of the vicinity.

The precise location of Kerhonkson is not simple to describe. Being itself nowhere, it is best understood as a point lying between two other points which are also nowhere. Emerging from the New York Thruway in the small city of Kingston (where a portion of this story will be set), one is invited by sign to continue northwest for some twenty-eight miles, toward the ragged plateau of the Shawangunk Ridge, until one reaches a place called

Ellenville, which—if one were to unadvisedly pursue the suggestion—is at last realized to be *nowhere*; a gorgeous, evacuated mausoleum of a town such as only America possesses the impatience to produce. Between Here and Kingston lies Kerhonkson. If one were to obey another sign northeast from the same point, toward and beyond the undeservedly famous town of Woodstock, one would arrive after less than an hour in Phoenicia, and would, it is likely, gain the opinion that “nowhere” is everywhere, and that wherever it is found, it is beautiful; it is the only place worth being. Everyone who dies in a nowhere-place is some kind of somebody. Research has been published to this effect, which time and the urbanization of rural localities has since shown to be both prescient and possibly too moderate. For all that they lack, both Ellenville and Phoenicia have their own funeral homes, established for the performance of those neighborly offices which were formerly given to true neighbors and true homes. Each also possesses a small and secret burial ground which, by simple desuetude and disorderliness, brings shame to the most capacious of metropolitan cemeteries.

After the hurricane had exhausted its fury upon the wretched and unready Catskills, I was barred by floodwaters and debris from returning to my cabin on the

mountainside for several days, and then, only to retrieve such provisions as would sustain me for two weeks at the resort, while awaiting the restoration of electricity to my isolated neighborhood. There, quartered in the oldest and most decrepit wing of the vast building, amidst the uninterrupted pelting of rainwater in buckets and garbage pails, I adopted the task of discovering all I could about the cult of Santa Muerte, laboring with a superannuated Spanish-English dictionary to translate the one slender book I had been able to obtain on the subject.

She was a saint whose popularity in the Hispanic world was dependent upon her prodigious reputation as a thaumaturgist—a worker of miracles, to whom her grateful beneficiaries swore lifelong devotion in recompense. Though it was impossible for me to cling to her with the pure and instinctive faith of the Mexicans, I felt myself earnestly to be in need of a protector, and hoped despite my misgivings that meditation and supplication would obviate the as-yet nameless doom that seemed always just ahead of me, and always already upon me. The image of the saint whose arrival I awaited was robed in white, betokening that aspect of her which was invoked to bring peace and repel the curses of one's enemies. While I hated the business of living and neither desired nor expected to derive any happiness from it, I felt myself, now in my

twenty-ninth year, to be steadily weakening beneath the weight of ever-incessant misfortune, disappointment, and heartbreak. All who knew me, and they were few enough indeed, were forced to admit the uncanny familiarity I seemed to share with the evil face of Fortune, while having rarely been granted a glimpse of her fair and beneficent mien. Venturing little in life, I had nevertheless managed to lose all, and that small degree which I had timorously gained back—my hovel of a home, my pittance of a job, the tentative and comfortless love of one or two women—I sensed with certainty that I was about to lose again.

There was, in this sense, little of the preternatural. Earlier that month, I had embarked on the final semester of my second bachelor's degree, which was to be attained in conjunction with a certification to teach English in New York. The final stage of this process, which I would begin in September, was to take the form of two student-teaching placements, each about two months long, in the seventh and tenth grades respectively. These requiring the same devotion of time and attention as actual teaching, albeit without the compensation, I knew already that I would be obliged to surrender both my position at the resort and my little cabin in the woods, the rent being costlier than my savings could sustain. I had already applied to my twin brother, with whom I had no

very affectionate bond, to take up temporary residence in the partially finished basement of the large Victorian house he had lately purchased for himself and his family: a wife, two children, and a Labrador. With a great show of reluctance, he conceded to admit me from October until December, at the rate of four hundred dollars a month, and with the express provision that while abiding there, I would keep nor consume no whiskey. In preparation for the coming drought, I increased my daily imbibition from a third of liter to a full pint—little though it did to increase my cheer.

As much of my present malaise as was due to the relinquishment of my home and livelihood, more perhaps was due to the loathing I privately harbored for the profession into which I sought by these sacrifices to be admitted. Having already squandered four years earning a degree in journalism, of which, being disinclined to seek work in the city, I could scarcely make use, I felt compelled by the injunctions of time and circumstance to adopt a new course by which something approaching a proper living might be made. Years before this I had entered upon my education with the object of making myself a teacher, but had been waylaid by bad luck and bad council, and now found it prudent—if personally uncongenial—to renew my original intention. But I hated

the schools, and the new theories of teaching were abominable to me. The idea of allowing young students to pretend that any good would come of their labors, or that any amount of true satisfaction was possible in the world of corporate inanities and consumerist fictions for which they were being programmed, doubled me over with spiritual nausea and inspired in me the acutest intellectual horror. I entertained visions of affixing a noose over the desk of every student, so that, whenever the truth of life's futility were to suddenly reveal itself to one of them, he could merely stand up, mount his chair, and push off into the infinite. Graduation, I imagined, might consist of lining the youngsters blindfolded against a wall and lobbing fistfuls of excrement in their faces until the metaphor of their existence was sufficiently comprehended. Had I set my eyes on becoming a stockbroker or a seller of snake oils, I could not have chosen a more dishonest or discreditable occupation, and the more approbation I received from my professors in the teaching program, the lower my opinion became of myself.

This soul-sickness did not fail to make itself visible, not only in my continuously resorting to the flask and the bottle, but in the slow and insidious development of a nameless illness that, as it progressed, enervated me so much as to make me almost a cripple. My acquaintances

were bemused to find me leaning feebly upon a walking stick, while for nearly two months, a dry, consumptive cough stayed with me day and night. At the nadir of my affliction, I gave myself up to the serene and grateful conviction that I was soon to die—that I would simply weaken and weaken until, unable to rise and not caring to eat, I would waste into nothing and suffer no more. It would save me the trouble of killing myself by some more assertive means later on.

Bent over my books with my bottle dwindling beside me, endeavoring to initiate myself into the arcane practices of a macabre Mexican folk-religion, I spent the last days of August waiting for the waters to recede, and pondering the irony—detected, perhaps, only by myself—of the storm’s having been named “Irene.” Continuously upon my lips was the old song, “Goodnight, Irene,” a rewritten version of which I had recorded myself the previous year. But I found myself singing the old Lead Belly version, as I thought of the rampaging brown torrents that the changeless streets of Phoenicia had become, as had the only road leading to and from the Hudson Valley Resort. And I recalled how, in the tiny, hidden graveyard by the overpass on State Route 28, where one might flash past Phoenicia in an instant without taking note of its existence, I used to sit in the company of

my sullen young friends, and listen to the cascading Esopus Creek as it raged across the boulders and the fallen oaks that protruded like enormous bones all along its twisting course. And I could almost picture myself singing to them, these precocious schoolgirls to whom life was already incredibly old, that lifespan in a quatrain, that fragment between epigram and epitaph:

Sometimes I live in the country,

Sometimes I live in the town,

Sometimes I take a great notion

To jump in the river and drown.

CHAPTER THREE - VEILS AND TRAINS

I broke off my engagement to Lorelei Black in June of 2011, four months before our wedding was scheduled to take place. Lorelei, who had adopted this name herself after being christened with something far less romantic, was in good spirits after several hours of visiting our usual Kingston haunts, prattling about the usual inconsequential topics—the wedding being foremost among these, however much it pained me to hear it mentioned. I had tried,

throughout the day, to retain an unaltered demeanor toward Lorelei; what pensiveness and hesitancy I betrayed went completely unmarked by her. The grim announcement, which I delivered in conciliatory tones as we sat parked outside the doorstep of her parents' home, came to her as the most unanticipated and bewildering of calamities. The day was hot; I rolled up the windows as Lorelei's screaming and wailing began. For many minutes, I could not prevail upon her to get out of the car, nor could I induce myself to try to remove her by my own power—so I listened to her weeping with that frantic, choking desolation that was particular to her among all the women I had known. It was only by giving her the fallacious assurance that the marriage was not to be canceled altogether, but merely deferred until a more practical date, that she submitted to getting out—though not without an unbroken continuation of her gasping tears and poisonous execrations. Her first conclusion, however I endeavored to contradict it, was that my affections had been usurped by some other woman—her refrain, between sobs, was, *Who is she? Who is she?* Hoarsely I answered, *There's no one. There's no one.*

I drove away in cowardly haste as soon as Lorelei was safely on the sidewalk, and I saw her in the rearview mirror, tottering after me in her tall black heels, her black

skirt and her elaborate lace stockings, her gargantuan purse wagging on her slender arm. She was still howling, still shrieking, her whole length crumbling beneath that ghastly, uncontrollable rage. I continued on numbly for some miles, unperceiving of my destination, until arriving in the parking lot of the town's largest liquor store, where I parked facing the railroad tracks and turned off my car. Taking out my phone, I called Danielle Adams, whose quiet and demure salutation arrived after several rings. *I've just broken off the wedding with Lorelei*, I told her, just loudly enough to hear myself over the methodical clanking of an interminable freight train that was creeping into some unseen depot nearby. *Oh!* she said, and, after a pause of three or four seconds, she asked me how I was feeling. *I don't know yet*, I responded. Fixing my gaze on the train, it was as if I could read my emotions printed on each of the slow-rolling, dull-colored crates: shame following upon elation, love following upon dread, torment following upon transport. I said, *I don't want you to think that I'm trying to place you under any kind of obligation. It would have had to be done regardless of any complicating circumstances. But*, I added, *I'd like to see you—tonight, if you can get away from your mother.* Danielle answered vaguely but reassuringly, she'd see what could be done.

My hands were shaking when I closed the call; there was something unidentifiably agonizing about the torpidity with which the locomotive lurched along, like a headless leviathan patiently entwining some gray, asphyxiated world. Dizzily, my heart clanging fitfully like the pots and kettles of a trudging peddler, I went inside to buy the largest bottle of bourbon I could afford, and felt some small relief when Kingston was safely behind me. I reflected, and not for the first time, on how all things seemed to begin and end for me in Kingston—my first marriage, my second marriage, my brief boyhood loves, and now my unlikely engagement to this captivating child with the siren's name. Every street and storefront bore the psychic cipher of some private tragedy.

I had not been falling in love with the same regularity as in former times, and until my dalliance with Danielle began early in the month of June, I had begun to suspect that old age and a surfeit of battle-weary caution had put an end to this once-vigorous propensity of mine. Perhaps it was by a sheer effusion of gratitude for its unexpected return that I put an axe to the wedding plans, like the father of the Prodigal Son slaughtering his prize calf. I had not lied to Danielle about my reasons; practical considerations had already made the wedding impossible,

and Lorelei was indignant at any suggestion of moderation. Progressive and emancipated though she gave pretense to being, her old-world Romanian heritage left her with the enduring conviction that of all occasions in a woman's life—even if she is marrying a man who has made record work of two brides already—a wedding is not the time to be stingy, nor even pragmatic. With the date established for October, and my own fortunes soon to be strained to their last degree, there was now no question that I had made a blundering miscalculation in proposing to Lorelei when I did, and indulging her unrestrained expectations as I had. But after years of being conjoined with her through a parade of relentless miseries, it was good to see the girl happy. It was good to know that one of us was in love.

Since something less than two years after my second marriage, Lorelei had been the most loyal and persistent of my mistresses. She was seventeen when I met her, and it was the detection of our involvement by my wife that first shook and finally toppled our nuptial union, which had been, at any rate, only intermittently harmonious. Lorelei remained tenaciously attached to me after my divorce in 2008, despite my occasional efforts to dislodge her, and for much of the time thereafter she was my only companion, even residing with me for a period when I first

came to Kerhonkson. From the day of our first acquaintance until the time of our last meeting, in the summer when my narrative concludes, she remained in all but the subtlest respects the same girl she had been at seventeen—spoiled, tempestuous, irrepressibly brash, and imperturbably oblivious to the rigors of adulthood. My proposal of marriage was made as much with the hope that by making her a wife, I might by some prodigy also make her a woman, as with the resigned acceptance that I would most likely never be rid of her anyway. The fanciful proportions that she attached to the wedding itself proved, through the engagement, how dismally misguided my fantasy of maturing her had been.

I had never married for love before, and the fact that I didn't passionately love Lorelei presented no particular obstacle to the union, as long as it seemed in accordance with the natural course of things. When, in June of 2011, I believed myself to have really fallen in love with Danielle, with a bright, obliterating passion so many years unknown to me, the natural course of things seemed to have been abruptly and irrecoverably altered. I allowed myself to believe, however briefly, that Fate had at last intervened on my behalf. For a week, perhaps, after the engagement was renounced, I experienced the quite unfamiliar and, on reflection, enormously unpleasant desire to *live*—to do

things, to see things, to rise up from my languor and walk in the light that shown from Danielle's beatific body. I even thought, at the pinnacle of my delirium, that it might be nice to start drinking less. The moment I had expressed as much to Danielle, while we sat together in the morning sun on the university campus where we had met, I realized the profundity of the error I had committed, of the blasphemy to which I had given utterance. The curse was irrevocable. Death must sentence me to life.

Accepting the evident superstitiousness of the statement—for all reasonable men must confess that superstition has its place—I believe that I can trace what might be referred to as the Great Unraveling of my already fragile and precarious post-divorce existence to this precise point, and to this solitary utterance. Instrumental as she was in granting me the courage and impetus to unfetter myself from that ill-considered commitment, which would have proved unimaginably ruinous and regrettable to both Lorelei and me, I have frequently and soberly pondered the possibility that Danielle was, so to speak, both a messenger and an implement of Death—deployed, not to kill me, but to wrest me from that vulgar complacency with which I had begun to unconsciously account myself one of the living, and permit me to see with a vividness beyond mistaking that *life is*

nothing but the self-realization of Death through decay.
The remainder of my relation, if it be successful, shall ideally stand to demonstrate and elaborate this quintessential thesis.

CHAPTER FOUR - DIALOGUE BY THE DUCK-POND

It was while taking a summer course in Gothic literature at the State University at New Paltz that I first encountered Danielle—taking little note of her initially, except as the young lady in the front of the classroom, with the peculiar face and preternaturally impeccable posture. I do not recall thinking her beautiful at first assessment; but it is unusual for me to think *anyone* beautiful at first assessment, all humanity being to some extent physically repugnant to me. In a crowd, I am confronted by nothing but caricatures and grotesques, and it is only when an individual body has been found to encase a beautiful soul, or the face to conceal an intricate mind, that the body itself can begin to interest me. This fact has persistently caused bafflement and discomfort in my idle associations with other men, for whom the world may be best represented by the example of a revolving magazine rack.

After a number of weeks had elapsed in the semester, Danielle began, as it seemed, to seek me out in the library

lobby, where I would often sit and read for an hour or two before class. She would quietly take the seat across from mine, greeting me silently with her massive brown eyes and inscrutable pout, until I undertook to begin a conversation. We would speak on indifferent matters for ten minutes or so, then she would excuse herself on some pretense, and I would see her again in class—acknowledging me only by turning and regarding me when I ventured to expostulate on some subject or other, in reaction to which she would evince no expression, and in response, offer only the silence of a spectator. Her stare, in this way, began to take on a presence of its own, though I could detect little of the personality or intellect behind it. In class, she was barely visible and never heard. In conversation, she seemed genteel, self-conscious, haughty without malice, and, far beneath all this, inexpressibly wounded and disconsolate. On this last account alone was I curious.

About midway through June, Danielle sent me a note acknowledging her awareness of my engagement to Lorelei, but conveying nevertheless the hope that “our intermittent meetings might develop into a friendship.” She desired me to know, as I had already perceived, that however incandescent an appearance she maintained, she was haunted by the knowledge that life possessed a far

grimmer aspect, and she suspected that I was—for reasons as yet unaccounted by her—uniquely sympathetic to this impression. It was, in short, a note precisely formulated to caress my vanity and provoke my interest. It having been prophesied to my parents that I would grow to be a renowned evangelist and wonder-worker, I have always suffered under the impulsion—antithetical to my otherwise nihilistic sensibilities—to be a comforter and a counselor; a quality which has made me, at times, sententious beyond endurance. Of all positions in this world, it is that of the dedicated ecclesiastic that I envy the most. Feeling elevated far beyond my normal condition, I made immediate and enthusiastic reply, suggesting a time for us to meet the next day. To Lorelei, who was at that moment about some private business in the adjoining room, I said nothing of the correspondence—only passing the remainder of the night, I recall, in an agitated but uncommonly cheerful mood. Not since my days in the secret graveyard with my circle of young admirers, then fully four years behind me, had I felt so marvelously important.

At the appointed time the following day, directly after the conclusion of our class, I brought Danielle to a wooden bench by the side of a broad pond, where the university's resident community of geese was variously engaged in

paddling, pecking, and preening. The moment we had sat down, she confided to me that her father, for whom she had possessed the greatest tenderness, had been lost to cancer the year before, and that she had henceforth been thrown into impenetrable darkness and confusion—seeming to live neither in the world nor out of it. Her life had lost its course, she said, and she longed for nothing but to hear her father's voice again, and to know what he desired her to do. She entreated me to tell her my thoughts on the immortality of the soul or the continuation of the consciousness, and to explain to her, if it was possible, how it is that the living can be expected to construct any sense or meaning for life, which death cannot in one instant sweep into meretricious irrelevancy. Even when speaking so earnestly, Danielle was the epitome of poise, except when, here and there, her words seemed to fail her, at which times she would blush very slightly, and with an imploring look, wait for me to interject the term for which she seemed to be reaching. As these first, striking intimations unfolded, I began for the first time to take measure of her personal charms, even so much as to think her pretty, and to reflect upon the mellifluous pleasantness of her voice. Still, I sat on the opposite end of the bench from her and ventured not to diminish the distance between us.

Though the matters on which she dwelled had been the subjects of my whole life's contemplations, I began by confessing that my answers may be found to be less than satisfactorily exact. Nevertheless, I replied to her substantially in this way. In spite of all of science's efforts to denigrate and discredit those means by which psychical researchers and spiritual seekers sought their own proofs of futurity, I remained both personally and objectively convinced that man's existence does not conclude upon the termination of his material life—that something of what provides us with our humanity—our “divine spark,” as Plotinus would have it—must in some capacity continue that struggle towards perfection by which all civilized endeavor is undoubtedly enkindled. I was very certain, furthermore, that for the majority of the dead, the ties of familial and social affection are not immediately severed upon physical expiration, and that there is always some degree—however imperceptible—of continued interaction between the fleshly and the spiritual dimensions, which can take forms ranging from dreams, to apparitions, to natural omens and baffling coincidences. It is very likely, I asserted, that her father's lingering presence could, with vigilance, be perceived through these or other phenomena—supposing, indeed, she wanted or required such assurances, disconcerting though they may be.

Danielle appeared gratified by these remarks, and I paused for a space to assemble my thoughts in the bright, squirming striations that flashed upon the water's surface.

Death, I continued, is not justly to be understood as the antithesis of life, nor is life to be thought of as being in any degree different from or opposed to death. They are both manifestations of the same original force, operating in unison toward the same ineluctable and unknowable aim. Accustomed though we may be to ordering our world through the identification of opposites—good and evil, light and darkness, life and death—the truth is, as Hegel went to such stupendous lengths to show, that each so-called opposite is merely the instrument by which its own opposite is revealed; in other words, there is no such thing as a one-sided coin, or a line with only one end. Each, without the other, would have no existence at all. Therefore, to question what meaning life can possess in the continuous and inescapable face of death, is to no purpose, since life without death would be not only meaningless, but impossible.

Here Danielle stopped me to inquire if I had not, then, just contradicted my previous defense of immortality. *For what is immortality*, she asked, *if it isn't "life without death?"*

Commending her for her perspicacity, I returned that the confusion lies in the limitations we have placed upon the definition of life—and, for that matter, death. Absorbed as we are with our own physical world and our own physical beings, we can scarcely be blamed for defining life along purely biological and phenomenological lines: that is, animate rather than inanimate, active rather than inert, etc. For all this, however, the most we are able to do is to demonstrate the superficial differences between those things which seem to us alive, and those which do not, without actually understanding what *life itself* is—what it is that inspires or invests living things with that indefinable and, at first, wholly involuntary injunction to *live*. At the other side of life, then, there is something trying to reveal itself or realize itself, without which this spontaneous and inexplicable cooperation of elements we recognize as “life” could never have been. To take an Eastern perspective, this might be best understood as an underlying Nothingness endeavoring to express its incomprehensible non-being *through* Being. By its continuously becoming, it is forever in pursuit of its own eternal and inextinguishable undoing. In a way that finds an intriguing if problematic corollary in the metaphor of the Crucifixion, God is the original and archetypal suicide, violently pursuing His ultimate repose.

Here I ceased, realizing that I had begun to lapse into a reverie of my own, which Danielle was clearly at pains to follow. At my suggestion, we took lunch together at a café in the village, during which a strange reticence or reluctance seemed to constrain her conversation, giving way to a prevailing sense of mutual discomfort. I walked her to her car, which was still parked on campus, and we parted ways with a handshake that seemed, if anything, vaguely apologetic—though her last gaze was pregnant with something like conflicted yearning, and she was not eager, once she had my hand, to release it.

I was tormented, on my return up the mountainside to my cabin, by a sharp sensation of disappointment and failure. The congenial reunion of two disunited souls which her first message portended had, despite a hopeful beginning, somehow never materialized. I concluded, after some hours' rumination, that the source of this unexpected discomfiture could only have been the absence of alcohol, without which indispensable elixir no conversation of value ever takes place. With this conviction in mind, I took her the next night to the open-air patio of a tavern in the village, where we drank gin-and-tonics until a late hour, and retired at last to her shared condominium nearby, where I awoke the next morning beside her.

Thus in a few days' time, Danielle and I went from being near-strangers to being the most deeply entangled intimates, while I became—not for the first time in my life—a philanderer, oath-breaker, and cad. What was blindingly clear from the instant my eyes opened upon the pulsating slots of sunlight on the clean walls of Danielle's bedroom, was that I could no longer maintain the diabolical farce of loving Lorelei. Worlds and solar systems ignited before me, and even with my heart threatening to explode out of my chest, I smiled and held my companion nearer.

CHAPTER FIVE - THE RED AND THE BLACK

The renunciation of my vows to Lorelei in no measure secured my relationship with Danielle, which, even while continuing more or less happily for perhaps the span of a week or less, never took on a particularly promising character. The girl was habitually irresolute and timorous, and I, hurled into the chaos created by my cancellation of the forthcoming nuptials, was sorely desirous of greater assurances than she could by her nature provide. There was, ever-gapingly between us, a great gulf of temperament, will, and experience, which the physical consolations which passed between us were pitifully

insufficient to fill. This had been substantially the case with Lorelei as well, but Lorelei had been fanatically devoted to me for years already, and, despite our innumerable differences, knew me better than a sibling. What knowledge Danielle claimed to have of me came almost entirely from such writings of mine as she had been able to locate on the Internet, amounting to a few books and journals of poems and other miscellany. Her appreciation of these was dangerously flattering to me, though she was soon obliged to confess that much of what she had read therein, though beautiful, was far from encouraging to my prospects as a partner, suitor, or denizen of mankind. How could a man so persistently and oppressively disparaging of existence ever hope to make her happy, or find happiness with her? How could a man who had been unfaithful to his wife, and then to his fiancé, be trusted to maintain his fidelity? How could a man who had never found anything but misery in love and horror in sex have any possibility of reforming these views now? I would attempt, every day, to supply answers to these and similar interrogations, but the next day she would read something else, which would overrule my arguments, and set her fretting and brooding afresh.

It transpired at last that Danielle's mother, the small-statured Peruvian widow who dominated and

designed her daughter's life in every particular, leveled an irrevocable interdiction upon the relationship—her reason being that she, too, had discovered some of my writings, and had concluded upon my being “the Devil.” Though Danielle was by every definition an adult, being then fully twenty-four years of age, she was the helpless thrall of her mother's benefactions, and was—as her only child and the last living member of her household—justifiably wary of bringing the woman further grief than Fate had already seen fit to incur. When Danielle informed me of this development, however, I was unable to withhold my indignation, and I entreated her, for the sake of her self-respect, to pay the injunction no regard.

Thus began our continuously more perverse and frenzied modern-day rendition of *Romeo and Juliet*, with Danielle appearing unannounced on my doorstep, staying half the night, then making a sometimes dramatic, sometimes surreptitious retreat, wracked with guilt and pursued by shapeless terrors. After two or so weeks of this my own nerves were nearly ruined. The comparative placidity of my former relationship with Lorelei began to take on a nostalgic hue, while my own guilt regarding the manner and cause of its dissolution brought torture even to those

moments when Danielle lay quiet and contented in my arms.

From the moment of our separation, Lorelei had never ceased to tax my phone with text messages and voicemails, at first to buffet me with every curse and imprecation her fertile imagination could devise, then, after about a fortnight, to implore me in tones ever more doleful and pathetic, to simply speak to her—to shun her friendship no longer, even if I would not accept her love. By degrees my resistance was exhausted, and I began to entertain these sorrowful conjurations. Because she was only faintly acquainted with Danielle's existence, knowing her only to be a classmate with whom I infrequently held converse, the reason for my abruptly calling our engagement to a close remained, to Lorelei, the most impermeable of mysteries, and I was content to preserve her in the delusion that my decision had been entirely practical. I explained that my silence—however cruel and inexcusable—was only intended to last until her anger had subsided, and she could reasonably be brought to understand the nature of my apprehensions regarding the wedding. I made no request for the return of the engagement ring, and she continued to wear it as a reminder of my eventual intention—once my studies were largely concluded and my future was somewhat

assured—to make her my wife: an intention, it must be said, which I ventured neither to positively advance nor entirely dismiss. Soon I began to meet her in Kingston again, and, with Danielle resolving more often than not to honor her mother's prohibition, my relations with Lorelei little-by-little resumed something of their original pattern.

Lorelei was approving of my interest in the Santa Muerte cult, recognizing in it some elements consistent with her own half-hearted neo-pagan practices, and while I awaited the arrival of the statue that I had ordered from Mexico City, she assisted me readily in preparing the altar that would be the saint's home. It was now, conveniently, the beginning of September, and decorations for the Halloween holiday were easily to be found, which answered neatly to my purpose. I purchased several boards of sturdy particle wood, painted them black, and made them into a box that would constitute the shrine itself. This I established on a shelf next to my bed, and placed around it all the ritual and decorative elements the altar would require when the image arrived: candles, artificial flowers, a bottle of drugstore perfume, an ashtray, various little skulls hanging here and there, and a liter of tequila with which the whole would be consecrated at the time of the statue's installation. Halloween being the signal highlight of Lorelei's year, her girlish glee at joining

me in these preparations almost exceeded expression. Even if she could not marry me in October as she had intended—and the thought of this invariably brought her a moment of gloom—I was nevertheless hers again, and the order she had enjoyed was in great degree restored to the world.

I confess that I do not recall how Lorelei became conscious of the extent of my relations with Danielle, nor how Danielle gained the knowledge of my renewed friendship with Lorelei. Doubtless it was some message or exchange of another kind left imprudently open on a computer screen, or the appearance of one or the other's name during an incoming phone-call. When I was with one of them, I would be obliged to ignore the calls and messages that came from the other, which would invariably excite the suspicions and worries of the unattended party, and cause her to try to reach me through even more excessive and urgent measures. Ensuring that one of them would not find me unexpectedly in the company of the other was an intricate task, requiring no small degree of continuous caution and vigilance, and sometimes finding me inveigled in bald lies and bungled stratagems, from which no sleight of hand or feat of genius could extract me. Still neither would relinquish her claim to my attentions, and I could induce

myself to lay neither of the rivals aside. While there was no question that I was in love only with Danielle, her constant indecision and vacillation was both maddening and painful, and I had no source of solace for this grief than the familiar presence of my former mistress and, with the exception of one male confidant, my only friend. Two early marriages had left me ill prepared for a life devoid of romantic love, however erratic, unsuitable, or conditional that love so often was.

Once, while I was in Kingston, drinking in a bar while my car was with the mechanic, I began receiving messages from Danielle to the effect that she was in despair, and intended to poison herself. Being unable to ignore such an urgent—though almost surely hyperbolic—declaration, but indisposed to rush to New Paltz, I tried for some time to reason with Danielle, whose threats—coming at a pace faster than I could reply to—grew only more adamant. Finally the message came that Danielle had swallowed a bottle of antidepressant pills and was awaiting the effects, whatever they may be. Helpless to take any other action, I did what was to me most despicable, and sent the police to her apartment with an ambulance. I could not suppose that Danielle expected anything else, as she knew that I could not then personally go to her aid. Still, I had been forced onto many ambulances myself over the years,

under circumstances not entirely dissimilar, and would have preferred to die rather than spend another night in the emergency room, or any period at all in the hospital's mental ward. I had resolved henceforth never to forgive anyone who called the police on my behalf again. Much of me remonstrated with myself that what Danielle had ingested was almost certainly not fatal, and that, in any case, it was her own choice to end her life in whatever way she saw fit; though, on the other hand, she seemed to be cajoling me into intervening somehow, and might have thought me callous if I had not. Lorelei, who had come to meet me at the bar, sucked contemptuously at her frozen margarita and chided me for giving in to Danielle's insatiable and embarrassing need for attention.

After an hour or more had passed, word arrived from Danielle herself that she had been taken to a hospital in Kingston, and I prevailed on Lorelei (God knows how) to drive me over so I could see into her condition. Leaving Lorelei brooding with her cigarettes in the car, I was issued into a curtained-off portion of the emergency unit, where I saw Danielle was awake and serene, reclining demurely on a mechanized gurney, with a small, dark-complexioned woman, who I immediately apprehended to be her mother, seated beside her. The woman scowled when she saw the restrained tenderness

with which I greeted her daughter, but did not refuse my hand when I offered it in introduction. Taking a seat across from her, with Danielle lying table-like between us, I undertook to acknowledge that I could reasonably be held to blame for the girl's wild discontent, but only inasmuch as our love for each other was anathema to her mother, whose disapproval she was desperate to avoid. I loved Danielle, I proclaimed, and owed to her the only happiness I had felt in years—a fact that, if anything, was verified by the extraordinary moroseness of those youthful writings which were the cause of my vilification. Danielle took my hand warmly as I spoke, and for a moment I felt sure that I could charm her mother into adopting reason. On meeting Danielle, I continued, it was as if the veil of my past sorrows was lifted, and a heart that had lain cold and unresponsive in my breast by steady strivings arose and took new courage. Since then, however, I had been riven to the marrow at watching how Danielle struggled under the conflict created by her mother's understandable but misguided censure, owing all love and devotion to the one who gave her life, but perceiving how deeply she was needed by the one whose life her love restored. It is for this reason that she was driven to this pitiable and frantic end, for this reason that she lay thus silently and helplessly between us—so that her mother could see for herself that I

was no kind of devil, and hear from my own lips the truth of my love for her unduly distressed daughter.

Danielle gazed at me sweetly as I concluded my declamation, but the woman remained sullen and shook her head doubtfully. Her only response, made in strong South American accents, was to thank me for seeing after her daughter's safety—by which it was implied that she would not, in the future, let the girl so far from her sight. I took my leave by kissing Danielle's hand and vowing to make restitution for the sorrow I had caused her, remembering only then that I had met my first wife's mother under strangely similar circumstances—by the side of a hospital bed, after the pregnancy had been detected. I nearly swooned to behold again how my life seemed to return upon itself in ever-descending and ever-contracting circles. On going out to Lorelei, I begged her pardon for my long absence, and she scolded me for showing Danielle such undeserved indulgence.

No parting of the clouds came as a result of my meeting with Danielle's immovable mother. Rather, while admitting that she could understand her daughter's fascination with me, the woman became only more convinced that my sable speech disguised a mind festering with untold wickedness, and that Danielle's life and sanity

depended absolutely upon her unreserved disavowal of me. Learning this from Danielle, I began in earnest to despair of our union ever being possible while her mother lived, and responded by adding both a red candle and a black candle to my now-completed altar: the former to aid Danielle in her resolution to choose me over her remorseless matron, and the latter to work against whatever foul machinations the woman had conjured to impede us. I found, once the altar was in place, that such credulous gestures came easily to me, though my “prayer” consisted mainly of standing before the statue and drinking glasses of tequila, after anointing her head with an oblation of the same. Perhaps I had the idea that, like Danielle herself, the drunker I got *La Santisima*, the more favor she would show me.

The consensus among those who have attempted to excavate the origins of the Santa Muerte cult is that her thaumaturgical reputation was first established among those who found her intercession useful in the returning of truant lovers—a conclusion borne out by the first printed prayer distributed in her honor, which was composed for the express benefit of forsaken mistresses, girlfriends, and wives. Though I had conceived of the altar primarily as a place upon which to center my undirected and formless religious impulses, for the satisfaction of

which no church and no operant tradition seemed to exist, this facilitative function of the skeletal saint could hardly have been expected to escape my interest in the midst of my romantic tribulations. What I hoped she would do for me as I stood swaying in concentration before her sepulchral image, I myself didn't dare to say—unless it was to strike me down with her own scythe, and leave my charred and scabrous heart to be divided among the many who once might have claimed the whole for themselves.

STARVATION DIARY

Concerning My Hunger Strike Against Life Itself.

Friday, December 9, 2011

An introduction to my reasoning.

I don't expect that anyone will read what is contained in this journal until after my pilgrimage has been completed, and I'm not concerned with adhering to the conventions of "blogging," such as the frequent inclusion of images and the avoidance of prolixity, etc. I certainly do not hope that anyone will turn to this diary with intention of being entertained by it; although I would not be troubling myself to undertake it publicly, if I were not sure of its potential

to be informative. It is not typical, in the realm of non-fictional writing, to be able to follow a person's thoughts step-for-step to the door of death--or at least as near to it as my strength will allow me to continue writing for. It galls me somewhat to be leaving this record here in the digital realm, but of course I cannot trust that anything set down by more palpable means would ever be made available to the public. It is for this reason that I accept the price of pseudonymity along with the benefit of immediacy thus afforded. I do not suppose that my identity, once my destination is reached, will go very long unrealized by those with an interest in discovering it.

The purpose of this journal, as suggested by the title, is simply to follow me (and to strengthen me) in my resolution, made on the present morning, never to eat again, and thereby to cease my life. I have considered other means of self-annihilation, naturally, but I have found them all too abrupt and uncertain, and I should like my voyage toward extinction to be an interesting one, availing me of the opportunity for meditation along the way. Rather than suicide outright, I prefer to think of this venture as an experiment in asceticism--a long and definitive fast, or, as I have already referred to it, a stationary pilgrimage through a little-examined travail, to the very source of the Mystery itself. Having found no

meaning, satisfaction, or contentment in the practice of living, I can only hope and presume that these things will come to me, in one form or another, in the practice of dying, through an abject refusal to sustain my own life.

Though I have considered this course frequently throughout the past year, and perhaps in a vague way throughout my life before that, I made the decision absolutely a little more than an hour ago, while driving myself away from what would have been a job interview at the local branch of a certain very large toy retailer. A succession of personal failures and unhappy circumstances have forced me to take menial work of the seasonal variety, and this would have been the second such post--the first, in which I intend to continue for the present, being at the perfume counter of a well-known department store. It is partly because I felt ashamed of myself for accepting such work, and partly because of the nausea and dismay that I felt upon entering the warehouse-sized toy-store, and hearing the Christmas jingles, and seeing the multitude of clamoring consumers, that I fled before my contact could make her way out to meet me. I drove away with tears in my eyes, knowing with all certitude that I could not continue in this world--that I wanted no more of it under any conditions.

Nevertheless, I am committed to dying passively--not through a rash and grandiose act of passionate despair, but through the purely philosophical determination that no mode of life that is available to me in this society, however noble or however ignominious it may be, is worthy of my toleration. The lowest of urchins does not deserve to suffer under the burden of humanity as it is presently constituted--to live as humans now must live. I am, therefore, ashamed of my race, and ashamed to exist as a member thereof, and it is according to this premise that my mortification is begun.

On drink and devotions.

It is clear that I must establish for myself parameters and conditions, according to which success in my endeavor can be assured. My first act should, I think, be to rid my small living area--the basement of my brother's house, which I have come to inhabit out of indigence--of what little food and reminders of food are present. Though my determination is fixed today, it may take me more than a month to attain my purpose, and I know not what torment or temptation the presence of victuals around me will create in the first days. I have heard that after a while, my

hunger (which is an annoyance right now) will be replaced by a certain euphoria, to which I look fondly forward.

My last "meal" was yesterday evening, perhaps at one o'clock in the morning, when I prepared for myself a can of cream-of-mushroom soup. Before this on the morning previous, I had half of an egg sandwich, which was thrust upon me by my sister-in-law--whose future offerings of nourishment I must somehow encounter with delicacy and prudence. I must persevere in remembering that I have embarked upon the only sure path to salvation--to delivery from the plague of modern existence--and that I will never conquer this world if I allow my animal desire for sustenance to conquer my wits or my will instead.

I must be careful, too, if I am to continue my nightly practice of drinking whiskey, lest the liquor softens my resolve, and induces me, for instance, to open another can of soup, or permit myself a slice of bread. Here is further reason for finding some way of discarding or concealing the edible contents of my kitchen. It seems, however, important that the possibility of eating remains, so that I can continue to consciously refuse it, in both symbolic and factual repudiation of life. I would be pleased to continue drinking beer, which is a great consolation to me, but I do not want to be guilty of somehow mistakenly sustaining

myself or prolonging my survival by means of the calories the beer contains. On this point I stand perplexed; though, really, there is no possibility that a body can subsist upon beer the way it does upon solid food, though it may aid me a little in assuaging my hunger pangs. But ought they to be assuaged, if my mortification--my martyrdom--be sincere?

I must, it is clear, devise a system of religious devotions, so that my passage out of life is not one of comfortless spiritual vacuity. Since Death itself is my goal, I ought to be able to center these devotions upon the *Santa Muerte* altar that I already maintain in my closet; though I must of course cease making my oblations of food and live flowers to the figure, as this would be both antithetical to my purpose, and a troublesome lure to my flesh. Luckily, this altar has been rather neglected lately, owing somewhat to my poverty, and somewhat to my religious inconstancy, so the last offerings I made of this kind have long since rotted and been cast away. I have no way of knowing what offense I may be rendering to the skeletal saint by depriving her of these traditional considerations, but I hope that my logic for doing so will be obvious to her, and that she will be satisfied as my attentions continue in the form of burning incense and keeping her shrine well-swept.

The prayers already written for both the conventional Christian traditions and the ancillary Santa Muerte cult will be of no use to me, as they are all concerned with assuring the benefit of those who wish to persist in the mortal condition, however freely of mortal passions and wants. I may be able to find some prayers for the dying which I can practice uttering reflexively as my pilgrimage proceeds toward its necessarily unpleasant end.

The Elysium of the Tormented

On my telephone three messages have been left. The first is from the county mental health office, in response to a request to begin intake proceedings, which I was forced to make yesterday while seeing a psychotherapist, who determined that my problems were "too severe and complex" for her to handle independently. The second is from the woman who had intended to hire me at the toy store this morning, and the third is from my sister's domestic partner, who also works at the toy store, and by whose referral I applied for the job. I have already assured myself that none of these calls will be returned. Clearly, I am no longer disposed to accept whatever

"treatment" the mental health office would propose for me, since it would surely entail some effort--most likely hospitalization--to prevent or dissuade me from carrying out my terminal renunciation of food. The others calls are no longer a concern for me, as I can most assuredly not abide the thought of taking work--however temporary--in such a place, at such a season, when the full enormity of the consumerist spirit is so boundlessly exhibited for the dubious benefit of the soulless children conceived under its influence. I have little need for money now, and no concern for survival. To ward off complete social isolation, however, I mean to retain my position at the department store until the point, which sits ineluctably upon the horizon, when I am too weakened by my self-assumed privations to return. Until then, I must continue to be reminded of the society and the culture from which I am so dramatically endeavoring to dis sever myself: a society of devourers, a culture of insatiability, characterized by wantonness and gluttony of every kind. I do not hold myself above it, of course; rather, I am doing what I must for my own redemption, as a penance for my incontinence, my complicity. *Consumer*, I have commanded my body as it stretches upon its cross, *consume thyself*.

A few nights ago, I had the good fortune of bearing witness for the first time as an acquaintance of mine injected herself in the arm with a dose of heroin. I had always been curious to view such a procedure, and I confess that I watched it with an interest contiguous upon the hinterland of perversity, making fastidious note of the way she bound off her upper arm with a long electrical cord, wrapped twice and secured between crossed thighs--numbering with mounting ecstasy the times she made abortive probes into the tortured flesh of her young and withered limb, smearing the black bruises with an effusion of supple scarlet droplets, searching for the blue, elusive vein. This acquaintance, mercifully desirous of relieving me of my long burden of melancholy, has invited me to visit her on Sunday, to give me an injection of the same illustrious opiate; but I have not yet decided whether or not the experience would prove edifying enough to justify the possible consequences, which are too familiar to suffer enumeration. For myself, I would be happy simply to watch her again, and to once again (as I did the first time) kiss the blood from the crinkle of her emaciated joint, tainted as it may be with some trace remnant of that diabolical ambrosia.

We are all, in our way, seeking Heaven--though the way that many of us pursue it--society, wealth, prestige,

etc.--can inevitably only bind us more thoroughly to the muck of the earth. The beauty of the drug-fiend is that she, in her own faint and greatly befuddled capacity, understands that the ascension of the soul can only come at the expense of the body: that the body must atone for the soul's disconsolate captivity. The souls of a thousand eminent businessmen and doctors' wives are not worth the froth that rolls from the cracked lips of a single overdosed whore. Made as we are for suffering, those who have not sufficiently learned to suffer--or to desire suffering--in life, must surely suffer all the more afterward. For every ounce of suffering that one avoids oneself must perforce be made the suffering of another. Thus we are only truly saved whose pursuit of Heaven leads us to the torments of the damned.

The contemptible urge.

How easily it is that we, the corpulent denizens of this ravenous land, reach for food in our idleness! Having passed the day setting down my scheme of starvation in writing, I thought that I would relax my thoughts in words other than my own, and sat down with the idea of turning the pages of a book until the time came for me to go to my

job at the department store. While I find the feeling of an empty stomach strangely satisfying, like a hot little lead ball suspended at the pit of my person, the moment I took to my couch, it was my *hand* that yearned--no, expected--to find a morsel of something to reach for, and thus traveling to my mouth, lose itself in senseless mastication while my eyes digested the lines printed before me. Of course, earlier in the day, I had tucked away into discreet cabinets everything I possessed that could be ingested, down to the last vial of Tabasco sauce. But even as I attempted to fix my concentration upon the volume I had opened, a secondary mind came detached from the primary, and went roving about the room, gnashing out its frustration at having nothing to put into its mouth. I tried to appease this unwelcome imp by giving it a pipe full of tobacco to smoke, but it responded by puffing where before it had gnashed, and soon I was quite blinded by the improbable quantity of smoke it produced.

I want this child that is in me dead: this spoiled, unmanageable little cretin that forages with filthy hands for tidbits with which to mollify its ghoulish love of chewing. I say it so that I will believe it--that *I am not hungry*. I am starving, and that is different. I am starving because food no longer exists for me--because there is no

nourishment worth seeking in this world--no delicacy worth the price of extending my stay here for a single hour. I am not hungry because I do not *want* food; what I am starved for, famished for, perishing for, is *purpose*--and that, only Death can bring me. The definition of a survivor is one who not only accepts the intolerable, but adopts himself to it--who masters the swine-trough by becoming a swine. This urge, then, to pass from one meal to the next, to reward myself for waking with breakfast, and for laboring with lunch, and for resting with supper, is the very enemy itself. I condemn a life lived on such gratuitously self-congratulatory terms.

My failures will eat the person by whom they were engendered, and when he is dead, the worms will eat the rest. My final and singular success will be my failure to go on feeding the failure that I am.

Two unequal Beauties.

Whenever I have applied serious consideration to the prospect of terminating my mortal existence, I have found myself perhaps inordinately (or perhaps not so inordinately) troubled by the question of what my sudden death would signify to my daughter, who is now ten years

old, and in what unfortunate ways it may affect her as her own life continues. It is not that I believe myself to be a fortunate presence in my daughter's life, or a good influence, or anything of that sort--because, of course, I am a destitute failure in every respect; it is only that I have difficulty tolerating the thought of her growing up to resent or disdain me even more after my death as a failure, than she would if I were to continue living as a failure into her maturity.

As regards my plan of starvation, the additional question arises of how I am to attend to my daughter's nourishment when she is with me, while continuously refusing to do anything about my own. I could say that I have already eaten, but as the day persists, this excuse will wear thin. I could tell her that I am ill, but then she would dote after me--but only so long as I could continue to make the dissemblance credible, because I am rarely ill. I could tell her that I have begun a special diet, but because I was already thin, she would want to know my reason for adopting it, and of what it consists, and why I am not partaking of those things. The dilemma only deepens when I am invited to join in the repasts of my brother and his brood, who occupy the upper portions of the house, or my sister, who lives nearby in the house that my former (second) wife and I bought together when we were

married. Even though I have rid myself of nearly all society but that of my immediate family, it appears as if willful starvation shall be a hard thing to hide for very long. And after a week, if not sooner, the physical change in me will likely be noticeable in itself.

I suppose I must do my best with what ingenuity I have. However great my failures in life, at the end of this pilgrimage, my daughter will know that, indeed, I was simply not meant for this world, and that I possessed--at least--the inner fortitude and integrity to take my own leave of it when my spirit could abide with no more depredation. I may be a puzzle to her for however long her own life persists, but my memory will stand as proof that the prerogative of survival is not insurmountable--that we are not obliged to live merely for the sake of living--that we may always make the choice between two unequal Beauties.

Skinny games.

The twenty-fourth hour of my abstention passed in the company of K. and E., the former of whom has been introduced already as the user of heroin. They came in the earliest hours of the new day, from a tavern where

they had been passing the evening in the company of friends; E. herself could scarcely be made to walk, and I had the pleasure of permitting her towering, cadaverous frame to lean upon me as I led them down to my basement hovel. Rather than forcing them to see the fullness of the disorder in which I live (for neither had visited me there before), I had perfunctorily prepared for their coming by lighting a profusion of candles and many sticks of incense, which gave what was visible of my hermitage something of the cast of a subterranean temple of Literature, over-strewn as it continuously is by a bedlam of books, arranged without reason in piles and stacks--as if a bibliographic Tower of Babel had been knocked down in the center of my living room.

Both girls found their way immediately and gratefully to a seat--I depositing E. in a soft armchair, into which her body fell like so many loosely-hinged sections of bone, while K. sank onto my couch, and instantly busied herself in devouring handfuls of popcorn from a bag that she had carried in with her. As I returned from the kitchen sink with a glass of water for the liquor-drenched and drooping E., K. offered me to join in her amusing repast. I declined with a candid admission of my late resolve to henceforth eschew solid food, even to the point of death--as I knew that K. is not of the disposition that would find such a

confession particularly strange or repugnant. In fact, she told me, she had attempted the same herself not long ago, but found that she could withstand no more than four days of it. I described for her my intention to keep daily record of my starvation, adding that I had made allusion to her already in one of my initial posts, upon which point she bade me good luck, while warning me of the discomfort that would await me as my fast proceeded.

The girls were already sleepy after their earlier celebrations, and the mood of the room, swaying with shadows and candlelight, and thick with the scent of incense, was entrancing and soporific. I drank what remained of my bottle of whiskey, and we conversed on such subjects as occurred to us, with E.'s speech especially betraying the extent of her drunkenness; as the hour slipped further toward morning, it seemed as if none of us knew fully whether we had been absorbed into a sort of shared dream, in which our words passed from our mouths as if another were speaking them, and were transformed upon the air into an unfamiliar but mystically cogent tongue. We traded kisses between us as children once traded marbles, in the days when children still played with each other. By this time, I too had paid my farewell to perfect sobriety, and, with E. commanding such a minute area of the seat--and being of small breadth

myself--I accepted a place beside her in the armchair. She passed her long arm over my shoulder, allowing her head to fall upon my breast, while I embarked upon a long discourse-- whispered into her ear, and of the oracular variety to which I am, at such times, often given--upon our absurdity as examples of humanity, and our mutual predestination for an unready grave.

When my soliloquy had ended, and we had all dozed for a while, and consoled each other with strokes and kisses, we all arose, and embraced, and I led them out again, this time giving my shoulder to K. I went to bed feeling quite at peace, and awoke late this morning without a trace of hunger, to pass the day in an easier mood than that to which I am accustomed.

Later, as my daughter played with her younger cousins, I related to my brother and sister-in-law my resolution to take what I described as a fast of significant length, over which they expressed great worry and incredulity. Since I had been so reluctant and infrequent an eater already, they failed to see how I was to benefit from mortifying myself even further--preferring that I stop drinking before I stop eating. I made shrift to explain that my insobriety is itself a form of pseudo-spiritual self-elevation, and that I

hoped, through starvation, to elevate myself still further above quotidian consciousness.

Drinking a glass of water and watching the family take careless portions from a large supper, I felt, at last, the clawing fingers of real hunger, and was pleased.

Saturday, December 10, 2011

From jubilee to lamentation.

Perhaps it is because I have passed the evening in the presence of my daughter, or because I am nearing the forty-eighth hour of my fast, that I feel now--with my pipe in my mouth and a glass of good brandy close-at-hand--a queer and unaccountable ebullience. It is nothing resembling joy or hope, of course: these are strangers to me even in my remotest memory. But this heretical defiance--this spectacle of contempt against life's most importunate instinct--is more delicious to me than anything the mouth could consume. It has become, for the moment, something like--if not actually amounting to--a purpose.

It is some manner of joke, however trivial, that the second time I have been invited to eat popcorn during my fast (the reader will recall my previous entry), it was by my daughter herself, for whom I made a bag while we sat together watching episodes of the 1950s *Sherlock Holmes* television show. Though she had made no inquiries earlier, when I sat through dinner without eating, she now showed alarm at my also declining the half of the bag that would normally be my portion. Seeing no value in dissimulating with her, I explained that I was subjecting myself to something of an experiment--to see how long I could go without allowing solid food pass my lips. Naturally she was anxious to know how long I expected that to be, and I told her regretfully that there was no way to predict--only that I would continue my "experiment" for as long as I was physically able. I told her that there were many thousands of people starving in the world, and that I wanted to know what it felt like to be one of them; also, that I wanted to demonstrate to myself and those around me the way in which food is taken for granted in our society, even by those who refuse it in deference to that society's aesthetic ideals; also, that I was hoping for some manner of indescribable religious epiphany. Her verbatim response: "I knew you were crazy, Dad, but this is something else."

Not a minute later, the dear girl had set herself upon the task of finding a website which could tell her what the longest recorded fast had been, and what had become of its subject. Though I had intentionally avoided seeking such information myself--desiring my experience to be unaffected by my knowledge of anyone else's--I assisted her in discovering that one could survive fairly well without food for about three weeks, after which point the body begins consuming its own bone marrow, and so on. I gave my further assurance that I would eat something on Christmas, which was a mere fifteen days away (leaving unsaid my intention to eat almost nothing, and to resume my fast immediately the next day, so as to save myself--petty as it sounds--the horror of another year's arrival). This, however, was not sufficient for her, and she began to scribble reminders, which she posted in numerous unavoidable positions throughout the apartment, reading "Eat December 17th or hopefully before! PLEASE!" On these I made no comment, but simply kissed her, and listened to her eating her popcorn as we rejoined the exploits of Watson and Holmes. I thought, *it is as good to hear her eating as it would be to eat myself*, and I remembered with what curiosity I had observed her in her fleshy, pink-robed infancy, picking bits of cereal up from the table before her and lifting them ritualistically up to her laughing mouth--her inconceivably

tiny, ball-shaped hands working like machines in rebellion--besmearing her bright cheeks and her many-lined neck, and pounding the air in furious, gleeful exuberance. Nature, Nature, you mischievous, mercurial chit! Wherefore dost thou bear us from jubilee to lamentation?

Tomorrow I will bring my daughter to church, and I will take my communion with my eyes full of tears, and I will sit and be interviewed for another job, and I will decide, in K.'s basement, whether or not to try heroin, or to let heroin try me. O Christ! The emptiness of it all.

Sunday, December 11, 2011

The patron saint of pretentious halfwits.

There is no loneliness to compare to that of expectation, short of the loneliness that comes with the expectation of nothing. What excuse can I give for my loneliness? At twenty-nine years old, and some years younger by appearance, I am neither capable of blaming infirmity or disfigurement for my isolation. In society, I am not destitute of charm; I have an able enough wit--I am not utterly ignorant of culture, whether popular or civilized.

And yet I sit here friendless--having nothing but occasional acquaintances with whom to occasionally waste my time--having no familiar place to which I may retreat. I sit and await an invitation to watch K. shoot drugs into her arm while drinking the insipid beer that her brother left behind upon his return to college. This anticipation--this meditating upon the whims of another--is the saddest part of loneliness, because it means that I have no society of my own: that I must content myself to obtrude upon the society of someone else.

And what is hunger, if not expectation--or starvation, if not the inconsolable expectation of nothing? When I was interned, as I have been on two occasions, in the mental health ward of the hospital, my day--like everybody else's--was made up of nothing but meals and the vacant interstices between meals--both of which were equally unsatisfactory. There was no conversation between inmates or roommates; nobody spoke except to complain aloud, or to utter a sigh of desolation or despondency. Now, in my frigid, makeshift burrow beneath the footsteps of my brother and his family, I am alone, without even a dinner to look toward--dreaming only of death, or of the further pursuit of death in strange and half-dead company.

I become drunk more easily now. After two glasses of brandy last night, my resolve nearly deserted me, and I went about opening my refrigerator and cabinets with the crazed idea of putting my stomach to rest--perhaps with some cheese or sardines--something inconsequential but soothing. Pouring a third glass, I grew fortunately too drunk to remember my hunger--too drunk to do anything but sleep. But I woke early this morning, sober, famished, in anguish--and went up to watch the rest of the family take a breakfast of waffles, which they mopped over saccharine pools of maple syrup.

The quandary came upon me later, as I rose and stood and canted my way through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist, whether the acceptance of the blessed wafer would constitute a betrayal of my vow; but I concluded upon the assurance (though not arrived at by any study) that the saints, in their fasting, must have continued to take Communion, and found in it no concession or dishonesty. It is, after all, *spiritual* food--having been transformed by the mysteries of the sacrament into something no longer perfectly earthly. And yet I think, perhaps, that I chewed the papery morsel more slowly and swallowed it more reluctantly than I would have, were I not marking my third day without solid sustenance. The

thought began to obsess me, of how magnificent it would be if I were a Catholic, and could take the Eucharistic sacrament every day, and--making that my only nourishment--pass slowly and gloriously into death with nothing but the body and blood of Christ in my stomach. And if God were pleased by this super-mortal feat of piety, he might choose to preserve me forever, or for years and years, as evidence of my beatitude and grace!

But this emptily eremite existence, this petty and egotistical act of existential spite, shows nothing of grace. As long as I have no true faith in anything, my suffering and death can be nothing but foolishness and vanity--the wayward conceit of a self-deluded charlatan. Am I to be the future patron saint of pretentious halfwits? Am I ever to be remembered at all?

PART THREE: NIGHTMARES

A DREAM OF DOROTHY

April 14, 2011

I was at some kind of poetry reading event on campus, or in New Paltz somewhere--a storefront, perhaps, with large glass windows and doors, facing the street, it seemed. It was the middle of the night, dead black outside, white light from lamps just barely making themselves visible through the glare and reflections. The room was enormously crowded, and from my position in rear of it, it appeared as if somebody--or several somebodies--were endeavoring to mount the podium; I thought I heard an amplified voice carried out above the animated din of the choking hoard--but all was noise, an unbreachable void of pounding chatter. People were holding up placards with pictures on them, no words, and the pictures were facing the wrong way: I could see them, but they held no

meaning--just colors, dark blue and black, desert yellow and red. Howie Good, the poet, my old journalism professor, sat in front of me, wearing a garishly-patterned African skull cap and a robe of the same design. He turned to me and, smiling, assured me that "things are really picking up now." Through his opaque glasses, I could see no hint of his eyes. At once, some sort of grand mal seizure struck me, and I fell from my seat, wracked with demoniac paroxysms, moaning terribly. With an indescribable exertion of will, I called out for Dorothy, gibbering her name first as an incomprehensible monosyllable, then forcing out the "D," forcing out the "r," so it was almost recognizable. She was the only one who could help me, who could bring me through the nervous attack. Howie Good was bent over me, his hands somewhere on my body, shouting at me to resist--not the convulsions, but the invocation of Dorothy. "Forget her!" he cried, swearing at me, pearls of foam on his lips: "Forget her!" But instantly, there she stood, high above me, inconceivably majestic and slender and benevolent, smiling symmetrically. She was shirtless; her breasts were like ivory medallions. My thrashing ceased--my arms and legs fell tamely to the floor; I felt saliva curling down my jaw and past my ear, but I couldn't move to wipe it away. My relief, in an instant, was replaced by a tempest of wild, indomitable grief: I peered up at the beatified vision of Dorothy--candle-like, intangible--and knew her to be false. She towered there, beaming, urging me in summer tones to rise, to come away. Howie Good was seething,

half-mad with rage and loathing—savagely, profanely he repulsed her. “Out!” he bellowed, “Out, whore, damned harlot, out!” I pleaded with my extremities to obey me—to lift me up and return me to Dorothy’s graceful arms of white, my sanctuary, my tranquil refuge. I raised my shoulders, but Howie pressed them down again. Dorothy fixed Howie with a shafting stare of petulant scorn, and then, bending close to me, said, “Fine, I’ll see you later then, maybe in the bathroom—someplace we can be alone.” The voice was like hers, the words were not; still, I strove to find my hands, a frenzy being upon me to touch her cheek with my fingertips. It was as if my arms were hewn away at the shoulder; piteously, I writhed, I whimpered. Never touching me, still auroral and indistinct, Dorothy turned to go. But then she turned again, coming toward me, saying, “Wait—one kiss to leave you with,” but as her lips sank downward to me, I again began to scream and struggle uselessly, suddenly horrified at feeling her wispy, incorporeal lips. Did they touch me? Did they not? Did they pass through my flesh like a vapor, like a fog? I never knew: she was gone. In possession once again of movement and sensation, I clutched my face and wept, twisting upon the ground, crying with all my voice, “*No life without Dot! No life without Dot!*” And then I was falling—awakening, it seemed, tumbling a few steps downward into still-darker consciousness. I landed roughly on my back, and found beside me the body of Lorelei, bereft of life, her engagement ring winking in the dusk. Again, I screamed, and again, awoke.

A DREAM OF MY BROTHER

February 18, 2013

The setting was like, but not identical to, the old house on Hurley Avenue. Occupied mainly with drinking whiskey in my bedroom, I could hear young, female voices amplified outside. Curious though I might have been to see what was being performed, I very consciously would not pull up the blinds to look down into the street, for I knew that the sight of the girls would horrify me. At last, when I heard a man's voice, I cautiously put my ear to the window, and was told confidingly (he must have been whispering from atop the roof) that he would see me later at the bar.

I went to your room, exerting myself to appear as if I was drunk, but trying hard not to appear drunk, although, in reality, the whiskey tasted like root beer, and I wasn't drunk in the least. You had undertaken, in conjunction with some exotic new hobby, the study of written Greek. It had something to do with charting the trajectories of suspended bodies. I asked you how it was coming for you, and, by way of demonstration, we were whisked to some manner of dark, indoor arena, beneath the domed ceiling of which, cars and SUVs were lunging at one another in mid-air. I perceived after a moment that each was hung from two thick cords, altogether constituting a

labyrinthine system of heavy zip-lines. It was a sort of aeronautic roller-derby. They collided and sped on. When I asked you, as you worked at your clumsy-looking controls, whether you were ever afraid of the cars crashing down upon you, your response was to quote the motto of your organization, which was:

"We serve in a clean uniform."

A man with a terrifically mangled forefinger approached me as you worked, whose uniform, I observed, was far from being tidy. He inquired after my knowledge of Greek, and, skeptically satisfied with my answer, asked whether he might entrust me with the pushing of a single button (to turn off a fan of some kind) when your part of the act was finished. He described it as the gravest of necessities that the button be pushed at precisely the right time. I hastily agreed, then resumed the sham appearance of drunkenness, speaking in a vaudevillian Cockney and pretending to misremember which button I was to push and when, to the general anxiety of everyone about.

Later, at the bar (which bar, I do not know), I found myself waiting for the man who had been lurking by my window ledge. I drank gallons of whiskey, but the owner of the quiet voice never arrived. As my consciousness ebbed, and my head sunk irresistibly down upon the table, a sentimental, Gordon Lightfoot-esque folktune rolled about in my ears, the principle lyric of which seemed to be:

"Tonight, tonight, life's faith is sticking."

Although it might have been:

"Tonight, tonight, life's fate is sickening."

And so I awoke, resolved, almost frantic, to make some account of it, and send it thus to you.

GUARANTEED GHOST-FREE CALLING

April 13, 2013

Lampooned on popular media was a previously little-regarded cult or sect that required newly-joined male members to marry unwed female members, and so confirm their loyalty. As I wandered around a supermarket in a fit of unfathomable despondency, I had found some of the sect's literature, and, seized by loneliness and the unnatural urge to stop passers-by in their tracks and sob in their faces, I seriously contemplated joining. It was not until encountering a specious far-Eastern television doctor (a general practitioner in the vaguest sense) in the parking lot, and actually weeping piteously in his uncomprehending presence for some minutes, that my resolution came clear to me.

All at once, I was there at the cult's wonderfully congenial storefront recruitment center, where matters such as the disposal of one's worldly property and the acquisition of the obligatory wife were arranged with the help of a decorous and well-trained staff, presumably voluntary. Among this staff, who all wore tan vests and golden name-tags, were a small number of telephone operators, whose promise was to provide "Guaranteed Ghost-Free Calling" to the marriage department, where records of eligible cult-members were kept, and marriage settlements conducted. This was an extraordinary relief to me. I had been much afflicted by ghosts of late, who not only grimaced relentlessly from dark places at the corner of my vision, but made doleful mockery of me on some spectral third line every time I tried to use my phone.

After a few minutes of waiting, during which I admired the quaint and home-like interior of the recruiting center, I was summoned to the desk, where a wife had already been found for me. I had only to speak to her parents on the ghost-free phone, as their consent was necessary for the match to go forward. At first lifting the receiver to my ear, I thought I perceived the unmistakable cackling of a ghost, but this was suddenly cut off, and I found myself in a brief but amicable conversation with the mother of my unknown intended. I spoke a little of myself, and she spoke a little of her daughter; we concluded quickly in a spirit of mutual satisfaction. Perhaps I heard a ghost

laughing as I hung up the phone, but my troubles seemed nearly at a conclusion, and it was not enough to put me off of my chosen course. A package of legal documents was furnished me by my recruiting attendant, which included a photograph of my wife-to-be. She was far younger than me, short-haired (in adherence to the sect's requirements for the unwed), and dressed in a modest white blouse of the frillier sort. At first, I was not disposed to think her especially beautiful, but her mother had described her in the liveliest and most admirable of terms, and her green eyes met the lens with--I thought--a detectable degree of intelligence.

Having signed myself and my effects wholly over to the cult, I left the recruitment office in the company of an already initiated escort, who was to show me the way of things while I went about in preparation to leave the gross world of ghosts and sinners behind. Among its other merits, this cult was to be distinguished by the old-fashioned but impeccable dress of its adherents. My companion, whose name-tag bore a cult-given appellation that I found wholly unpronounceable, was long-haired and bearded (therefore married), and smartly accoutered in dark, pinstriped trousers, a black vest, and a shirt of deep violet. I was fascinated by his black, polished walking stick of fantastic sheen, and as our first point of business, he proclaimed that he would assist me in procuring one of my own. The world looked lovely to me now; my cares were as figments, the ghosts shrank meekly into harmless recesses.

Perusing the shops with my companionable guide, I found a slender and beautiful book, which--though I did not know the girl--seemed the very gift for my newly betrothed. We took the little volume to the cashier's station, where I issued with a thrill of amusement my new credit card, which had been provided to me at the recruitment office by way of allowance, since my whole fortune had been surrendered to the cult. While my escort was inspecting a rack of strangely fragile-looking walking sticks nearby, a young lady joined the queue to the cash register, accompanied by what must have been her mother. I turned and apprehended with breathless astonishment that she and the photograph were the same! "My bride," I cried at last--and she smiled so beautifully that I cursed and fumed and struck at the air: for at that moment, I was awakened by the buzzing of my phone on my nightstand. Raising it angrily to my ear, I heard the indescribable taunting of the ghosts.

END OF BOOK.